

## **Follow Your Heartsong”**

**March 13, 2011**

**First Sunday in Lent**

**Text: Matthew 4:1-11**

The teenager played by Andrey in our little drama this morning did a great job of resisting the temptations that Katie threw at him. So we won't be too hard on him for being tempted to toot his horn for being so virtuous—thus finally falling for the temptation of his own egotistic pride.

This morning's gospel reading tells another story about temptation. Like our “tempt-detector” technician luring her fellow teenager with all sorts of enticements, Satan tempts Jesus with worldly power and glory. Unlike our teenager, Jesus resists **all** the temptations Satan offers.

We can look at the story of Jesus in the wilderness as proof of his “perfect sinlessness.” In fact, we speak of Jesus as the “new Adam” who takes away the sin brought into the world by Adam and Eve's transgression in the Garden of Eden.

But have you ever wondered why Jesus went into the wilderness in the first place? Did you notice that the Devil didn't lead Jesus into the desert? The Holy Spirit did. What was God up to?

Let's walk a little way into that wilderness with Jesus this morning and take a fresh look at his experience there. In the wilderness, we may find a new understanding about the nature of temptation.

Jesus grew up as the son of a carpenter. Jesus may have known he was a special child, because his mother probably told him the story of his unusual birth. Even so, he must have puzzled over exactly what they story meant while he was cutting and fitting wood at Joseph's side.

Then when Jesus went to the Jordan to be baptized, John the Baptist proclaimed Jesus as the holy one of God, and when Jesus came up out of the water, a voice proclaimed from heaven, “This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I'm well pleased.”

Jesus was the anointed son of God, but he was also a human being. When God called from the clouds, Jesus must have wondered exactly what the voice meant.

Then immediately after his baptism, he was led into the wilderness by the Holy Spirit.

In some African and Native American traditions, young men go into the wilderness alone to pray and fast, usually for a number of days. During this time, they seek visions that will tell them their mission and purpose in life.

Jesus' time in the wilderness is a vision quest. He goes alone into the desert and he fasts and prays for forty days. In the desert, Jesus has a vision that tells him how much power he possesses. He can, if he wants, turn rocks into bread, the Devil tells him. He can, if he wants, jump off the temple and call on God to save him. He can, if he wants, rule over the whole world.

The Devil tells Jesus exactly how much power he has, and it is awesome!

The question that Jesus must answer in the wilderness is how he will use this awesome power. He may be the anointed son of God, but he is also a human being. And at some point in the desert, he must have been tempted to take the Devil up on his offer.

Temptation always involves something we want. If Jesus has no desire for the kind of power and glory the Devil offers, there is no temptation. You can't be tempted by something you don't want.

In the wilderness, Jesus is tempted to use his power for his own glory and pleasure. But his vision quest has helped him understand his power in terms of mission. His choice is to fulfill that mission.

His choice is good news for our salvation, since that is what he came into the world to achieve. But it is also a challenge for the kind of choices we make.

Like Jesus, we, too, have awesome power because God created us with intelligence. We also face temptations, many of them similar to the one confronting our young hero in the play this morning: gossip, cheating, substance abuse, taking what isn't ours.

But all these temptations have at their root the same one Jesus faced in the desert: Will we use or abuse the great power of intelligence we've been given? Through our temptations, we are constantly challenged to choose what kind of people we will be.

Do we use our power for the good of others or only for our own gratification? Do we use it to build people up or to tear them down? Misuse of the power of intelligence can be as small as spreading rumors about a neighbor or as huge as a political leader telling lies to the public. The result in both cases can be catastrophic.

I feel confident in saying that most of us are not abusive. For us, the greater temptation is to misuse our power by not using it at all.

We are tempted to waste our abilities, preferring to take the easy way, to just get by. We see a tough job that needs doing and we have the talent to do it, but we say, "Let somebody else take care of it." We see a wrong that needs righting, but we say, "It's somebody else's problem."

And don't we have a lot of excuses for this behavior?

Don't we tell ourselves that we are powerless, helpless, too weak, too old, too young, too busy—not smart enough or brave enough to do anything about the evil we see in the world?

After all, we're not Jesus. We're just ordinary human beings, trying to get by.

Week after week, preachers like me announce the good news: that God is for you and nothing you can do or fail to do will keep God from loving you. We tell you that it is not what you do that matters most, but what God has done for you.

And one of the things that God has done for you and me—through our baptism—is to give us the same Spirit that led and sustained Jesus in the desert. You are not an ordinary person; you are an extraordinary child of God, imbued with God's own Spirit—and so am I, whether or not we choose to use it.

The next time we tell ourselves that we are not powerful enough to make a difference, I'd like us to consider a young man named Mattie Stepanek.

Perhaps you've heard of Mattie. He was born in 1990, the last of four children born to Jeni Stepanek. Like all of Jeni's children, Mattie was born with a rare genetic disorder that Jeni did not know she carried. This disorder would kill his three siblings by the time Mattie was three years old and would eventually also kill him at the age of 13.

By all rights, Mattie could have been a bitter and lonely little boy. The disease killed his two brothers and his sister. He knew he was going to die. His father was not part of his life, and his mother also suffered from a disabling disease. But Mattie was determined to live life as fully as possible and to use his power as a positive force for good in the world.

Despite the fact that he had a trache in his throat and an oxygen tank to help him breathe, despite frequent hospitalizations and constant pain, despite crippling muscular degeneration that made a wheelchair necessary, Mattie was a young man of deep faith, and he was convinced that God had a special task for him. He believed that every person is given a “heartsong,”—a special vocation that only that one person can fulfill.

Mattie’s “heartsong” was to be a writer, a public speaker, an accomplished prankster, and most of all, a peacemaker. In his short life, he accomplished all but one of these goals.

Mattie had an irrepressible sense of humor and was notorious for pulling off great practical jokes—like the time he secretly put apple juice in his urine specimen cup and drank it in front of his horrified doctor.

Mattie also became a best-selling author, penning five books of poems, which he called, “heartsongs.” And he became a motivational speaker, appearing on *Good Morning America* and *Oprah Winfrey*, serving as spokesperson for the Muscular Dystrophy Association, and striking up a deep friendship with another peacemaker, President Jimmy Carter, who delivered the eulogy at Mattie’s funeral, calling him the most remarkable person President Carter ever met.

On September 11, 2001, in response to the tragedies of that day, Mattie wrote the following poem, called, “For Our World.”

**We need to stop.  
Just stop.  
Stop for a moment...  
Before anybody  
Says or does anything  
That may hurt anyone else.**

**We need to be silent.  
Just silent.  
Silent for a moment...  
Before we forever lose  
The blessing of songs  
That grow in our hearts.**

**We need to notice.  
Just notice.  
Notice for a moment...  
Before the future slips away  
Into ashes and dust of humility.**

**Stop, be silent, and notice...**

**In so many ways, we are the same.  
Our differences are unique treasures.  
We have, we are, a mosaic of gifts**

**To nurture, to offer, to accept.**

**We need to be.**

**Just be.**

**Be for a moment...**

**Kind and gentle, innocent and trusting,**

**Like children and lambs,**

**Never judging or vengeful**

**Like the judging and vengeful.**

**And now, let us pray,**

**Differently, yet together,**

**Before there is no earth, no life,**

**No chance for peace.**

Mattie died in May 2004, one month shy of his 14<sup>th</sup> birthday, without realizing his dream of world peace. But he has left a legacy of peacemakers, who continue his work and his vision through a foundation set up in his name.

In the past few weeks, as our state has descended into a kind of chaos, I've been struck by Mattie's words of wisdom. Who—on either side of the political divide—has taken time to stop, just stop and listen for their own heartsongs and the heartsongs of others, those who agree with them and those who disagree?

This morning, we will baptize a little girl. We will pray for her that she lives a long and happy life, bringing joy to her family and friends, touching the world with her own special heartsong.

She will be tempted—by egotism and self-centeredness and the world's pleasures—just as we all are. But if she is taught to listen for her heartsong, then she can use the challenges and tests of her life to grow into the person God intends her to be.

Here is an excerpt from another poem by Mattie, for her and for us:

**Every journey begins**

**With but a small step.**

**And every day is a chance**

**For a new, small step**

**In the right direction.**

**Just follow your Heartsong.**

That is what Jesus was doing in the desert. And that is what you and I are called to do today.

Amen.