

Lent 1, 2008
Good Hope Lutheran Church
Matthew 4: 17 ff

Again from the Gospel of Matthew, chapter 4. I'll read just one verse for you. It says, Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness, to be tempted by the devil.

The Lord be with you. And we pray:

Father in heaven, strengthen us by the gift of your Holy Spirit, that we may overcome all the temptations that will face us this day. For Jesus' sake forgive us when we stumble and, in your mercy, lift us yet again, that we may face the temptations that will surely come again tomorrow. This we pray in the name of your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord, AMEN.

“It’s a jungle out there.” That’s the kind of, slightly corny thing my parents told me, before I left home for the wider world. And I listened, kind of, and I quietly promised myself that nothing quite that silly would ever come out of my mouth. Oh no, I would never say anything anywhere near that lame to my own kids—course I do. It’s a jungle out there, parents warn children today, as they’ve done in every generation; and it is. It *is* a jungle, and it seems to be getting worse all the time, doesn’t it? More of a jungle out there every day—or so it appears to me.

Gambling, for example. Many possible examples, but to consider just this one: Gambling. Time was, that gambling was considered a sin, but evidently not anymore. It’s not even called gambling, it’s called “the gaming industry,” huh? Pretty slick, and it’s everywhere you turn—from the Internet to the corner convenience store, for many it’s become an intentional vacation destination. State budgets rely on it, it’s become acceptable, legitimate, main stream. Only it’s not. It is, still, gambling, still not something I can square with the Christian faith. And the fact we as a society have swallowed it hook, line, and sinker just goes to show you—it’s a jungle out there.

Or profanity, gratuitous violence, blatant sexuality. These are things I *think* we still have issues with, things we still want to protect our families from. But can we? Even if for instance you don’t allow those movies into your own home, still our kids come back from school talking about the movies their buddies have all seen, movies I’d be embarrassed to go see myself, so why are 3rd

graders watching them? Hello, do we know? It's crazy it's, some kind of jungle out there.

And other examples too, right? Right, now the funny thing about this jungle out there, and the funny thing about this overgrowth of problems we keep complaining about. The funny thing is, it's not simply out there, is it. It's not out there, it's in here. Oh it would be nice, I know. It would be nice sitting here in church to believe "the jungle" was just out there somewhere, but plainly it begins here. Within my heart, and yours, after all somebody keeps buying the lottery tickets. Somebody keeps using R rated movies to baby sit the kids, and so on, is it us? You and me? We are torn by conflicting motives, knowing what is right but drawn to what is easy, and convenient. We know what is right, but we also know what is socially acceptable, we know—we know just exactly how much we can get away with doing, and still manage to look good to our friends. We know what it means to love God, but we have to admit we love ourselves an awful lot more, and I think we can all see in ourselves how lines get blurred and how, difficult decisions yield to easy excuses; it's a jungle out there? You bet it is. But the real story, the real conflict for people like us, it begins with the jungle in here.

And therein lies the power, and the promise, of the Gospel story for today. You see Jesus journeyed to the wilderness—and won! Jesus journeyed into the wilderness—and in those days, corny parents like Mary and Joseph would have said It's a wilderness out there, and meant pretty much the same thing that *we* do when we say It's a jungle out there—Jesus journeyed to His own personal wilderness; the one in here. And He saw and felt everything the Devil had planted in His heart. And that's where the real conflict is, right? Even for Jesus. It's the jungle, the wilderness within. "So listen Jesus," said the Devil. "You have the power. Why not use it, for yourself. You have the chance to enjoy life Jesus! Why throw that away, why suffer and die for sinful people, why not let them suffer and die for themselves? And even if you insist on loving all these people Jesus," said the Devil. "What would it hurt. What would it hurt not to, and to look out for yourself instead. Just this once."

That's the temptation Jesus found, in His wilderness. But thanks be to God, He remained

faithful. Lines did not blur, principles were not compromised, excuses were not made. Jesus didn't cave, but instead remained faithful. His heart stayed with God, even as He left the wilderness behind, and went on from there, to fulfill the mission He had from His Father.

And the power and the promise of this Gospel story is two-fold—one, the mission Jesus had from His Father, the one He went onto fulfill—that mission was to die and rise again to forgive people like us, people who do cave in and who will compromise; people who do blur lines and who always make excuses. We know better, we just don't do better, in our lives the wilderness always wins. But Jesus saves. Jesus saves, He died and rose again to forgive people like you and me. The power and the promise of this Gospel is that Christ knows what temptation is like, and He died and rose again to forgive us the fact, that we've never been able to get beyond it.

And two, the power and promise of this story: Though we can neither overcome temptation nor escape the wilderness within, Jesus can. Jesus did. And Jesus is here to help. You don't have to face those old temptations alone. You don't have to struggle with sin and the Devil as if you were the Son of God and the fate of the world was on your shoulders—the fate of the world was on His shoulders, and He's already won. And He's with you now. With His help, habits can be broken and lives can be changed. Temptations can be met. No need for excuses anymore—the past is forgiven, and the future belongs to Him. No need for excuses—Jesus has come to bring us out of wilderness at last, and into the Father's Kingdom.

It is, a jungle, out there, and we know it. And there is much we can do as Christians to make this world a different kind of place. But at the beginning of Lent we confront the wilderness within, and our need for Christ to move us beyond old sins and temptations, and simply make us a different kind of people. May this be the day we let Him get started, in the name of Jesus Christ, AMEN.