

First Sunday in Lent | March 1, 2020 | The Sunday of our 350th Annual Meeting

Tested in the Wilderness, a sermon by Nancy S. Taylor based on Matthew 3. 1-11

Jesus enters the desert, the Judean wilderness. The wilderness is remote, inaccessible, and inhospitable. It is an arid expanse, rocky, sandy, marked by natural terraces and deep, steep, dangerous ravines. It is not a safe place. It is a lonely place.

It is here that Jesus spends 40 days and 40 nights, fasting and tested. The story has it that the Devil appears and tempts Jesus: flattering, wooing, and enticing him to assume power. To grasp the reins. To take charge. To step up. To run the show.

That's what's at stake here. In this story. In this crossroads for Jesus. Power is at stake. The three tests to which the Devil subjects Jesus are all variations on that single theme: power. In a word, the Devil is hoping to corrupt Jesus. Wouldn't that be a coup? Power is a potent corruptor.

The question at the heart of the story is this: Jesus, son of God, what sort of Christ will you be? What manner of power will you wield? We are not talking about the kind of horsepower that propels a boat. Nor the kind of muscle power that sends a well hit baseball out of the park. Jesus is tempted to wield social power: the ability to coerce, influence or control other humans. In Jesus' case, as he is the son of God and clever with miracles, the temptation is to dazzle, astonish and amaze, delight and beguile us. He is tempted to use spectacle and miracle and a cult of personality, which, as it happens, is pretty potent. It is real power.

Jesus resists such power. He rejects it in favor of a different sort of power: the power of love, of compassion, of mercy, the power of forgiveness, the power of healing, the power of persuasion verses coercion and invitation over imposition. The power of freedom and free agency.

Your freedom to accept or reject him is all yours; yours alone. That's the way Jesus meant it to be.

Today on this Sunday of our 350th Annual Meeting, I am thinking of our Pilgrim and Puritan forebears who were, in their time, tempted in this wilderness, tempted to wield power, corrupting power.

What were the temptations that enticed them?

First, our forebears were tempted to import to this soil a way of ordering life that was unquestioned in England and Europe in the 1600s: aristocracy. A system of peerage, nobility, gentry; the hereditary right to royalty. The forming of a government in which power is held by the nobility.

Our forebears resisted this temptation. They found no biblical justification for ordering human society in this way; indeed, they saw much biblical justification for ordering human society with equity, equality. They had their class system to be sure, and birth and wealth mattered. But birth and wealth were not all that mattered. If you were useful – perhaps the best shoemaker in Boston;

if you were unusually pious; if your contributions to the common good were exceptional – these characteristics or qualities could lift you to a place of honor.

Second, our forebears (our white, male, propertied forebears) resisted the temptation to hoard knowledge. They could have prevented women and girls from learning to read. As was true for much of the South, they could have prevented enslaved persons, persons of African descent, from learning to read. Instead, refusing this temptation to hoard knowledge – too keep it for themselves and to themselves – our forebears supported literacy for everyone.

Three hundred and fifty years ago, the literacy rate in England was less than 30 percent. Three hundred and fifty years ago, the literacy rate right here was close to 100 percent.

A Massachusetts law in 1642 required heads of households to teach their wives, children and servants reading and writing. Why? So that they could read the Bible and so that they could read and understand colonial laws. As early as 1647, any town with 50 or more households was required to hire a teacher. Compared to Europe and the American South, this was enlightenment. Our forebears established schools, lots of them, along with free public education. After the Civil War, our forebears set about founding schools across the south for freed slaves. These were the first schools integrated by gender and race. These schools became the heart of the Abolitionist movement.

Our white, male, propertied forebears could have hoarded knowledge, kept it to themselves. After all, knowledge is power. They resisted that temptation.

By putting the Bible into the hands of women and enslaved people, our forebears resisted the temptation to be the only interpreters of the Bible. Our forebears who were women and those who were enslaved, read their bibles with their own eyes, through the lens of their own experience. Over time their voices, perspectives were heard and heeded.

Third, the Devil tempted Jesus to save himself; to avoid the pain and shame of crucifixion and death. I liken this temptation to what transpired here, beginning in February of 1692 and lasting for thirteen months: the so called Witch Trials.

This was a catastrophic episode. It inflicted pain, fanned terror, pitted neighbor against neighbor and resulted in the execution of 20 persons.

By contrast, however, the witch trials that raged across England and Europe lasted for hundred of years and took many tens of thousands of lives, wreaking untold havoc and misery and terrorizing millions of people over many centuries.

To end the havoc of this outrageous episode, in thirteen months, our forebears put themselves in harm's way to do right by the accused. Our minister, Samuel Willard, stood between accuser and accused; not a safe space to stand. When a founding member of this church, sea captain John Alden, was jailed for witchcraft, Samuel Willard, under cover of night, helped to break him out of jail. Samuel Willard risked his own life and reputation – risked being branded a witch himself, branded by association – to save the lives of others. He resisted the temptation to protect himself.

Similarly, our puritan forebears were opposed to blood sports, such as bearbaiting and cockfighting. Why? Because these involved unnecessary injury to God's creatures. They resisted the temptation to wield power over helpless animals.

In the worlds of historian Marilyn Robinson, "by the grim standards of the time, our congregational forebears were astoundingly liberal".

Our Puritan and Pilgrim forebears are often ridiculed and derided. They are caricatured as dour, witch-hunting, mirthless, religious zealots. That is too easy. Too easy from a distance of three and a half centuries. Were they people of their time, enmeshed in the mores of their own historical era? Yes. Of course. As are we. But they were stretching and pulling and breaking through to a new era, a dawning era.

The founders of this church – twenty-eight men, with wives and some widows -- were the children of religious refugees whose grandparents lived in the Middle Ages. They migrated to this wilderness because they believed the church in Europe and England had been corrupted by power. They came here seeking freedom of religion, freedom from dogma, freedom from ecclesiastical hierarchy, freedom of the press. They came seeing to know the Jesus who resisted temptations to worldly power, coercive power.

I propose that the reason we are who we are today – a progressive Christian community, a moral community, with a heart for the poor, and a fierce hankering for justice, for equality – is that we are the direct descendants of what our founders started.

About our founders. Among them were a butcher, a bricklayer, a brewer, a bookseller, a shoemaker, two ship's captains, two felt-makers, an apothecary, a silversmith, a tailor, several merchants, a town selectman, and a schoolmaster. Among them too, the wives of these and handful of widows, including Mary Norton.

I want to bring these forbears into this sacred space today. Maybe they can hear me today. Maybe they can see us. Maybe they can see you. Maybe they are looking in today to see what has become of the church they founded in 1669 in an argument over baptism. They suffered for that. They suffered mightily. But they did it for the right reason.

Indeed, the founding of this church was itself a ceding of power, an opening of another door to yet more new comers, more religious refugees, more inquirers, more people hungry for grace, more persons curious about the kind of power Jesus wields.

The founding of this church, the Third Church in Boston, meant that those who were already in had to move over, scrunch over, and squeeze in, to make room for the new comers. That, too, is a ceding of power; a temptation resisted. Turns out, once this door-opening is begun, you find there's no end it. I am reminded of an Easter Sunday some years ago. One of the associate ministers gave a good Old South welcome to those in attendance. Afterwards, a member told us that a woman in the pew in front of her elbowed her pew mate, leaned over, and said: *They let anyone in here!*

Yes, well, blame it on our forebears. Blame it on the bricklayer and apothecary, the felt-makers and silversmith. Blame it on Mary Norton and a handful of widows. Blame those who founded this this church of the open door by resisting temptations to worldly power.

Maybe our founders can see us now. Maybe they can hear our thanksgiving. Maybe they are tearing up as we say to them: thank you. Thank you for the temptations to power you resisted in Jesus' name.

Our founders were remarkable people for their day, remarkable for their liberality.

On the Sunday of our 350th Annual Meeting I proclaim to you that they were tested in the wilderness and they did not fail.