

First Baptist Church of Augusta
Psalm: Psalm 91:1-2, 9-16
Old Testament: Deuteronomy 26:1-11
Gospel: Luke 4:1-13
Epistle: Romans 10:8b-13
Life's Big Temptations: Assuming God Has a Hot Tub

February 21, 2010

NRS Luke 4:1 *Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, 2 where for forty days he was tempted by the devil. He ate nothing at all during those days, and when they were over, he was famished. 3 The devil said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread." 4 Jesus answered him, "It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone.'" 5 Then the devil led him up and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. 6 And the devil said to him, "To you I will give their glory and all this authority; for it has been given over to me, and I give it to anyone I please. 7 If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours." 8 Jesus answered him, "It is written, 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.'" 9 Then the devil took him to Jerusalem, and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here, 10 for it is written, 'He will command his angels concerning you, to protect you,' 11 and 'On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.'" 12 Jesus answered him, "It is said, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'" 13 When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time.*

Does God want me to have a hot tub? That is our big question today. But more about hot tubs later. Our scripture readings from Deuteronomy and Luke compel us, in the words of Walter Brueggemann, to mediate on “a primal human question: ‘Who will make us safe?’” As a culture we have looked to many answers to that very question of who will make us safe. Some have looked to the economy; others their careers, some their families, still others, the government. Even though our answers maybe a bit more sophisticated than the ancients, they are really not much different.

At first glance, the Old Testament reading from Deuteronomy seems to have nothing in common with our Gospel lesson from Luke. One is set in abundance, the other in scarcity. In Deuteronomy, it almost reads like gratitude for plentitude. In fact, with verse nine we hear the familiar description of the land flowing with milk and honey to describe how abundant everything is for the people. It concludes with the words from verse 11: *Then you...shall celebrate with all the bounty that the LORD your God has given to you and to your house.*

Next, we hear from the Gospel according to Luke, and Jesus is *not* in a place of abundance, but deprivation, not in a land of milk and honey, but of rocks and hunger. Jesus, we are told, was led by the Spirit – in other words, led by God – to the wilderness...to be tempted, tested...for forty days. Last January, we traveled to Jericho, and the Mount of Temptation was pointed out to us by our guide, who said that this is the traditional site of the temptation of Jesus. Whether or not that was the actual mountain really does not matter. All I know is, that place was bare, rocky, and forbidding. There was nothing plentitude about that place, even in the 21st century.

And so, I want to share with you an image that is somewhat analogous to both our Old Testament and New Testament reading, as we confront the question of who will make us safe. I think this analogy will tie it all together: the hot tub. By the way, I really love hot tubs.

I am not too sure if a hot tub is too flamboyant for a pastor, but I have to confess I have long coveted the luxury of owning a hot tub. I know, as far as luxuries go, that is not much. Many of you have hot tubs. For one reason or another, we have just never made the financial commitment to purchase and install one.

I love hot tubs. Whenever we travel and the hotel has one, I will use it. Even though it is not particularly good to stay in one more than a few minutes, I believe I could spend the entire day in one. I love them best when it is cold outside and my muscles and joints are tired or stressed. I slip in and relax. I love the bubbles, the jets, and the hotter the better. Of course, when I stay in one too long it makes it all the more difficult to get out. First, I do not want to get out. I like it in the hot tub. Nothing is required of me, but to just relax and not worry about a thing. Secondly, the longer I stay in a hot tub, the harder it is to get out physically. I feel wiped out and tired. Once I flop out, about all I can do is crawl back to my room.

I am not sure if God had a hot tub in mind with the Bible stories this morning, but it just might fit.

Consider our story from Deuteronomy, and reflect for a moment about your own orientation, when your life is abundant. When the family is safe and well; when the bonuses are generous; when your health could not be better, where is your orientation? In this story in Deuteronomy, God is instructing the people not to lose their perspective now that the hardship of Egypt is safely behind and the opportunities are richly in front of them. Don't let the hot tub seduce you.

Many of us do just the opposite, however. We grow forgetful or distracted or just plain lazy, and therefore God accounts for a very small place in our life. God is moved to the margins of our politics and our practices and may even be merely an afterthought.

When I was sick a few weeks ago – and many of you I have since learned, have recently had this similar virus or bug – I thought about, when cognition allowed, how I take my health for granted. I am blessed to get up every morning pain free, and to have healthy legs and lungs to take me where I need to go. But for about 36 hours, I was in pain!! Why is it that we have to lose something before we are willing to bless it or consecrate it? The Hot Tub analogy fits for some of us in the sense that we get warm, cozy, snug, and lazy.

In this ancient story of Moses and the children of God, they are reminded the importance of consecrating over to God their gratitude and their own blessings for their safety, their security, and their plentitude that they enjoy. What about, however, when the plug is pulled on the hot tub and the water drains out and you are stricken by cold realities?

This whole episode with Jesus in the desert is a stark contrast to hot tub religion. The temptation of Jesus was a period of forty days. Consider the biblical antecedents: Moses' forty days on the mountain without food; Elijah's forty days of flight to the mountain of God; Israel's forty years of wandering in the wilderness.

Wilderness, too, has Biblical antecedents. It is not simply background. It is no wonder we have this text at the beginning of Lent. Jesus testing is no different than ours today: wealth, control, and power.

While much can be said about this forty day encounter between Jesus and the devil, it can be reduced to Jesus' temptation and testing was about how he was going to carry out his life's mission.

Fred Craddock writes: "Being committed to the way of God in the world does not exempt one from the struggle...If Jesus struggled, who is exempt?"

The hot tub is closed and whether we want it or not, the wilderness waits. I am not suggesting we seek it out. In fact, I think sooner or later the wilderness finds you. It comes when you read a "Dear John" letter from someone who pledged to be there till death do you part. The wilderness surrounds you, when you are being wheeled down a hall on a gurney, while a minister mumbles a prayer that "all things work together for those who love the Lord." The wilderness is not something necessarily sought out; it just might find you with a layoff or when the children stop speaking to you or you just feel completely empty inside.

You look over your shoulder and the temptation for the hot tub is great. Comfortable, relaxing, and inviting – slip in and stay as long as you like. If things get too hot, or too cold, or no longer comfortable, get out and move on. One theologian writes that the “Modern man” wants of religion a “total tickling relaxation, the sense of being at once soothed, supported, and effortlessly invigorated.” (J.I. Packer)

But you know you cannot stay there even if you wanted to. You have to figure out how you are going to face this solitary life, when there is abundance and when there is nothing.

That is why I think of Lent as an important time to observe a fast, not because we need to punish ourselves, but to discover what our one true life is really made of. Giving up desserts or cell phones or coffee for forty days is not because these things are necessarily bad, but, because one cannot live on bread alone, or control, or power. Less can be more.

In a hot tub culture of distraction, consider what it might be like to reorient your life, so that your trust and security is in the One who sustains in the wilderness and through the wilderness.

Two different stories. One story tells of the importance of blessing God for the bounty, the abundance given to God’s people. The other story tells of trusting God, when there are no other resources. Two different stories pointing us in the same direction: to God.

I still want my hot tub, but even if that doesn’t come, I am learning day by day what it means to bless God and give thanks. It comes when my knees are strong and my faith is soaring, and it comes when I am not sure how to get out of the wilderness.

I want my hot tub, but it can never come at the expense of laziness and ingratitude. It cannot come at the expense of not willing to do the hard work that faith demands.

Lent is the time to sort out all the other would be answers and solutions that amount to distraction, from the core of what it means to trust God and follow God through the desert and beyond – when the hot tub is full and when the plug has been pulled.