

The thing that strikes me as odd about that story isn't that Jesus would have been tempted. What's curious to me is that there weren't a few more temptations. Wasn't he also tempted, for example, to just marry pretty Lydia or brilliant Rebecca who lived down the street in Nazareth, and settle down in a nice cottage with a regular teaching job and have children and plant a garden? Wasn't he a little bit tempted to first travel some – now, while he was young; see Rome or Ephesus or Cairo or Athens? He would still have all the time he needed for his itinerant ministry. Wasn't he even momentarily secretly tempted to save up and buy a fast horse – maybe even a chariot? (I would have been.) I have to think there were some of those kinds of temptations also. As it says much later in the New Testament in Hebrews, "Like us, he was tempted in every way."

But this story of Jesus in the wilderness isn't about the many optional varieties of temptation. It's about the internal pilgrimage that Jesus went through before he knew who he was – knew who he was to himself, in his relationship with others, and as a channel of God's presence and love.

I think that the reason he made it a point to tell the disciples about this particular wilderness struggle of his was so that they would know (and we would know) that the spiritual process through which God creates us can be a demanding, difficult and scary one, fraught with all manner of confusing, tempting options.

Look at it again. It begins for him in a real wilderness. (That's often the case.) The first temptation is to make his own personal survival and well-being the main purpose and first concern of his life. "Turn stones into bread," it said. "Turn time into cash. Turn ability into comfort. Get secure first. Be realistic, Jesus. One can't be very spiritual when his stomach is growling and he's shivering and miserable because it's raining in on him. Yes, "turn stones into bread; that's the first and basic thing. He gets past that one somehow.

The next one is in some ways rougher, because it's explicitly religious, and temptations tainted with religion are always the most confusing and seductive ones. This one said, "If you're going to do this, Jesus, do it sensationally. Prove to yourself and everyone around that you have faith like no one they've ever seen before. Jump from the temple steeple and attract a flock of angels, or threaten to die if the money doesn't come in (as Oral Roberts did some years ago), or pray a hurricane away from the coast. Get some headlines for God's sake. Power's the thing. Become a hero of the faith." Do you see how tempting that would have been? If one is serious, sincere, committed and devoted, how do you get past a temptation like that? But he did.

Then comes the most reasonable and temptingly sensible suggestion of all. It said, "Jesus, you have everything it takes to dazzle the world if you will just be practical enough to work with, instead of

apart, from all of this which is already here and going well. You don't have to invent the wheel of religion all over again, Jesus. Cooperate, fit in, pay your dues, work within the system, bow down and do homage to the practices and traditions, become one of us and you'll be wonderfully rewarded and blessed. We'll see that you're never without a large synagogue to serve." It made sense. It really did. Astoundingly though, Jesus saw through that one too. He recognized it as a temptation to, in effect, lease himself out. He decided against it.

Only then, having worked through all of that, having faced his doubts, having become directly acquainted with his own human hunger for security, and having discovered first-hand how seductive some of the quick answers and shortcuts can be, he's ready to move into that which he felt called.

I would assume that if Jesus had to go through that experience, that stage, and those kinds of struggles in his spiritual unfolding, a similar birth and growth process is required of you and me. In fact, I think it raises questions about the kind of simplistic, once-and-for-all spirituality where one supposedly "got religion one night back in 1973," (something like getting a DPT vaccination) and that was it. Henceforth they know all they need too know, believe all they're supposed to believe, and are forever safe from doubt, from hell, from ambiguity, and from change.

That's a little like the child who was reported to have come home from his first day in school saying, "Mom, I can write my name. I can read some words. I can count to 20. I can draw a house. Do I have to go back?" The six-year-old naivete is chuckled at for its childishness. But something pretty close to that simplistic approach is often accepted as okay in adult spiritual development.

The patron saint of that sort of thing is in the old story of the noted astronomer who found himself seated next to a minister on the plane. He was really quite patronizing and condescending toward the minister as they conversed. In fact he said at one point, "Reverend, I really don't have any need for all that spiritual stuff. My religion can be summed up as 'Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.' Really, doesn't that just about say everything that needs to be said, Reverend?" Instead of answering the question the minister replied to this noted astronomer, "Well, actually. I've never seen much point to, or need for studying astronomy. Really, don't you think it can be summed up in 'Twinkle, twinkle, little star, How I wonder what you are?'"

Well said! Spiritual development is a life-long process. If it's real, it may have any number of stages, digressions, "ahas," stopping offs, restartings and reformings. Those can all be very unsettling and still be absolutely healthy, appropriate, and quite necessary.

Several years ago I shared some thoughts from M. Scott Peck, who talked about four stages of spiritual development. He's the widely read author of such books as "The Road Less Traveled," "Further Along the Road Less Traveled, and "Children of the Lie." Many of you thought his "stages," while not fully fleshed out in my sermon, were helpful tools of thought in understanding ourselves and

some of the things we grow through. So I'd like to briefly revisit these this morning. Some people manage to skip one or two of the stages. Others bog down in one stage or another. Others go through all of them. So this is a tool for re-examination during this Lenten season.

The first stage of human spiritual development, according to Peck, is chaotic – a wilderness. Persons in this stage are anti-social, confused about themselves, threatened by others, and in general, ricocheting back and forth between fears, impulses, appetites and compulsions. With many of them, their sense is that this is a meaningless dog-eat-dog world in which the “law of the jungle” generally applies. This is the stage, for example, in which criminals find themselves stuck. But there are also many perfectly law-abiding, respectable persons who spend a lot of time, if not most of their lives in this wilderness stage. It's the lowest level of spiritual development (or non-development).

But then, often quite sensationally, they may get religion and move unmistakably to Stage Two. The religiousness in Stage Two tends to be very rigid, dogmatic and authoritarian. It is, though, precisely what they're looking for and genuinely need at this point in their development. They've had their fill of chaos, confusion, and not knowing what is to be believed and trusted. They want God and need God! In this stage it is a God, though, who is a benevolent authoritarian, a policeman-in-the-sky. It's not God's grace, but rather God's order, judgment and precept that's their hunger and need. It rescues them from the chaos and confusion of Stage One, and they're not only thankful for it, but often fiercely devoted because of it. Therefore, those in this stage aren't very tolerant or charitable toward persons who seem to them to take less seriously the rules and judgments that they believe God has imposed.

Moreover, the passionate believing of Stage Two isn't always focused upon “capital “R” religion. There are any number of small “r” religions, like nationalism militarism, or semi-cultic secular organizations that will gladly accept the devotion of those whose burning need is for that total devotion to heavy structure and authority. Dostoevsky must have been referring to this stage when he said, “So long as man remains free he strives for nothing so incessantly and so painfully as to find someone to worship.” That, in fact, is the vulnerability of this stage: bowing down to any powerful religious or quasi-religious authority.

Stage Three is much less volatile and is usually dramatically different from Stage Two. Observers, especially those in Stage Two, may label it a “crisis in faith.” What it turns out to be is a third, very different stage of faith.

In this stage, skepticism is allowed and doubts are entertained. Most authority is questioned, EXCEPT the authority of intellect and reason. They are very individualistic. They may tell you they think they're probably agnostics; especially when they compare themselves to their experience in Stage Two. They aren't anti-social, though. In fact, by this stage, their empathy, their sense of

justice, their honesty is very acute. Despite their incessant questioning of almost everything being so upsetting to Stage Two people, Dr. Peck insists that this is a new stage.

But for some Stage Three people comes a hunger for yet something more. While they have no intention of going back to smothering the intellect as the price of having a faith, they begin to challenge the presumptions of the intellect. They begin to sense that there is something sterile about “worshiping the bottom line,” about always being antiseptically “realistic,” and about smothering the “child” within them. They begin to want to feel again as well as think. They want to intuit as well as reason. They want to laugh more, cry more, dream more, are even willing to bleed some.

They’re the ones who move on toward what Dr. Peck identifies as Stage Four. Stage Four is the hardest stage to talk about because it is so “individualistic” and thus there are few generalizations. Often there is renewed wonder, awe and gratitude in this stage – more than at any time since childhood. One writer characterized it as discovering that God is calling us “to come out and play.” For some there’s a renewed mysticism -- in the sense of beginning to recognize mysterious ways in which they’ve been touched, moved, excited, reborn. Most freeing of all, they no longer have to explain it or interpret it or make someone else agree with it. They simply relish it, celebrate it and let it be what it is. In Stage Four, the world and life aren’t the immutable moral machine of Stage Two or the scientific problem of Stage Three. The world and life are rather a living, throbbing, process into which God, as revealed in Christ, invites them to participate in creating and improvising (yes, maybe “come out and play). Interestingly enough, religious traditions and practices may now become important again. But if so, it won’t be as in Stage Two, as requirements, duties, dogmas or proofs but rather as celebration.

Those in Stage Four are much more comfortable with ambiguity. They’ve come to know the tension between faith and doubt to be a healthy tension. Pain, sorrow, and tragedy aren’t angrily taken as proofs that there can be no God, nor are suspected of being punishments, ominous signs, or inscrutable glitches in some divine script. No, suffering, when it comes, is accepted as a legitimate part of life, one into which one goes with God to discover, create and grow just as one would in the happier parts of life.

Well, maybe that gives you a feel for it. I suspect Dr. Peck isn’t far off from accuracy. I say that because I’ve seen it in people’s lives, even in the spiritual development of some of you here at Christ Church. The point is, though that there is a lot more than we thought; the stages, the doubtings, the explorations, the sheddings, the rebuildings, are legitimate and maybe even necessary in the growth and development of our spirits. They aren’t to be feared.

The fact, for example, that you can’t believe everything with the single-minded simplicity that you once did, could denote some growth in you that needs to be explored and confirmed rather than

denied or bemoaned. On the other hand, the fact that logical, level-headed, practical, reasonable old “you” have lately had twinges of wondering if there’s more to reality than the orderly, provable part that’s beginning to bore and depress you – that’s not necessarily a sign that you’re slipping backward into childish sentimentality. It could be the very growing edge of you.

In any case, as trite as it sounds, we’re all on a journey – at least we should be. Expect it. Do everything you can to keep yourself moving. Don’t expect it to be simple. (The Ten Commandments are the Golden Rule but are NOT all you need to know. Don’t be afraid of the inconsistencies or doubts that come. Because even when it’s bewildering, the journey – your journey – is too exciting and too life-giving to miss or to be allowed to become bogged down or stuck. Besides, this is the very thing for which we were created.