

First Sunday in Lent
March 10, 2019
Luke 4:1-13
Rev. Chip Whitacre

A few days before Christmas last year I went on an errand to pick up some items in south Minneapolis. As I approached the intersection at Hiawatha and 26th I noticed there was someone seated in a lawn chair on the center island. Since I was turning left, I ended up right beside this person. The person was pretty well bundled up against the cold, but I could tell she was about my age. She was holding a sign on her lap. I can't recall what it said exactly, but I remember it had the words "help" and "please" on it. So, there I was, confronted by a fellow human being asking for help. Unable to escape the moment. And unable to tell if what I might do in that moment would actually help or just make a bad situation worse. It's a quandary that I'm sure many of you have experienced. But there was something different about this situation. Something that compelled me to roll down the window and give her some money. And I did it. Just like that.

Maybe it was that she seemed close to my own age. Or maybe it was that I had just driven by the homeless encampment along Cedar Avenue. Maybe it was the season. Whatever it was, my response was without hesitation. Now the traffic light at that intersection is extra-long because of the light rail train. So, we had a nice chance to chat. And I found out that she was there every day. And her sister was there with her. She even pointed her out to me. Sitting on another lawn chair on the island across the intersection. They came there to get money to house and feed and clothe the five grandchildren they were raising together. To say the least I left there with mixed emotions. I was glad that I had felt compelled to acknowledge her presence and act on it. But I was sad to see someone struggle so. And maybe just a tad guilty that I had monopolized so much of her time.

That encounter came to mind when I read today's lesson from Luke. Now, on the surface it would not seem to have had anything to do with wilderness or temptation. We were, after all, at a traffic intersection in a busy city. And the only temptation was mine – to pretend I didn't see her sitting there right next to my car. When we think of wilderness, we tend to think of the desert or maybe here in Minnesota the Boundary Waters. We usually imagine vast expanses with little human presence and no signposts. The kinds of places where a person can easily become disoriented and get lost. But wilderness can be a life experience too. Take away the usual markers that define the boundaries of our lives and we can just as easily get lost. People who find themselves suddenly homeless often express a sense of not knowing where to turn. As do people who've lost a loved one or who are getting divorced or who've been diagnosed with a serious illness. Things like housing and clothing and food are signposts too. And without them people can and do lose their way. And that's when things can go really awry. When people are at their most vulnerable temptations abound. They can and do make some of their worst choices. But, paradoxically, they make some of their best choices too.

And that is why Jesus' temptation in the wilderness resonated so with my encounter in south Minneapolis. His experience of isolation and extreme hunger could have left him disoriented. It could have weakened his resolve. Left him more susceptible to the tempting offers put before him. But it did not. He was not tempted to use his power to satisfy his own extreme hunger. Or to prove who he was.

Or to turn away from God and worship another. He deflects those challenges as deftly as we might shoo away a fly. We might say that in the wilderness Jesus discovered his true self. And in a less dramatic way, I think that's what was going on with the woman at the traffic light. She's had a wilderness experience. I think most of us would find even one grandchild coming to live with us daunting. And probably initially disorienting. But five. We can only imagine how this woman and her sister ended up caring for five grandchildren in the first place. We can imagine the surprise and lost sense of direction that came with it. We can imagine the little temptations that must visit her every day. We can imagine a lot, but to be honest, we don't know much about her story.

But there are some important things that we do know about her. We know that she was willing to endure the embarrassment of asking for help in a very public way. We also know that she was prepared to suffer the indignity of being ignored by people who act like she isn't there. We have to ask ourselves why. In the face of an existence that must be challenging in the extreme was she desperate or courageous? I think that what was on full display out there on that corner was the strength of her character. Or we might say that at the very center of her being she found resolve. Resolve to accept the responsibilities that had been dropped in her lap. To resist the possibility of making her grandchildren wards of the state and walk away. And the strength and courage to go get what she needed to care for them.

The really sad thing about this story is that she is not alone. And that is what I really want to talk to you about today. We have all noticed the increase in people seeking help at intersections. And we know about the increase in the number of people who rely on various forms of assistance. People who, you might say, are having their own little wilderness experiences. More and more they are people who have a job or even two or three jobs. A job is not enough anymore. Last year a national survey concluded that nearly 40% of the people in this country would not be able pay an unexpected expense of \$400 without borrowing. Or going without some other necessities. People who are spending as much as 60% of their income on housing are having to make some pretty daunting choices. Housing or transportation. Food or medicine. Three meals a day or two. Or one. More and more people are having to rely on food shelves to feed their families.

Last year ICA, the local food shelf that serves the south lake area, distributed almost one and half million pounds of food. Other food shelves serving other communities in the western suburbs are doing the same. To draw attention to this need we have a major food and fundraising drive each year in March. It's called Minnesota Food Share. This year the middle school youth group at Trinity is leading our drive. They've come up with a catchy tagline for the project – We CAN Do It. And they have set an ambitious goal. One thousand pounds of food and \$1000 in donations. I encourage you to support their effort to the fullest extent possible. Because there are a lot of other people out there who are working hard to find their way out of the wilderness.

We may not have stood on street corners asking for money, but each one of us has had our own wilderness experience. Probably more than one. And we know from those experiences that desperation can be the prod that gets people going. Or it can be the wave that overwhelms them. We know that it takes resolve to resist the temptations of such times. And that it takes courage to ask for help. And we know that having someone join us in our little corner of wilderness, even for a moment, can make all the difference.

Amen.