

Sermon: Off We Go!
Text: Matthew 4:1-11
Date: March 5, 2017
Context: WWPC
First Sunday of Lent
By: Rev. Dr. Steve Runholt

Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness . . .

Matthew 4:1a

Off we go, into the wild blue yonder.

It's a phrase that has worked its way into the American psyche. I'd bet every person here has heard it before.

Most of us also know the tune that accompanies those words, even if we don't know the rest of the song, or the title of the song. (For the record, the title...wait for it... is "The U.S. Air Force." What it lacks in imagination it makes up for in specificity.)

Off we go, into the wild blue yonder, climbing high into the sun.

I say this because that first phrase -- off we go, into the wild -- could almost serve as our theme, our motto, for today and for the next five Sundays. That is to say, for Lent. Just need to add four little letters: n-e-s-s.

For the last several years we've framed the six Sundays of Lent around a specific theme. It's always fun to do. I believe it's been a fruitful exercise, and has opened us up to new ways of thinking about the season and the meaning of Lent.

Whatever theme we pick, this story of Jesus heading out into the wilderness to face down his tempter traditionally launches us into the Lenten season. And not just is. This is true world-wide: this is the text that gets the whole show started.

This year, as I was thinking about the question of a possible theme, I read this passage and one particular phrase leapt off the page and grabbed my attention: *Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness.*

I realized that was it. That was our theme. So for today and the next five Sundays, we're simply going to follow the Spirit as it leads us through these Lenten texts and through this Lenten season.

So, off we go, not into the wild blue yonder but into the wilderness.

Which is why what happened next is just a tiny bit ironic. I noticed that for all the attention given to Jesus's time in the wilderness, we know almost nothing about his experience there.

We do know that it lasted forty days, and that he fasted the whole time. But apart from that, we know nothing about what his experience was like: how he spent his time, what he thought about, where he slept. Did he get cold? Rained on? In most cases these kinds of concrete details help capture the reader's attention.

But we're given none of those specifics. As intriguing as it may be, Jesus' wilderness experience is not the focus of this story.

Temptation is the focus.

But not your generic, garden variety temptation. Not like adding a second scoop of ice cream on top of your fresh, hot apple pie. Or parking in a handicapped spot since there are four of them open and the lot is otherwise full and it's raining and you're only going to be in the store long enough to buy a dozen eggs.

Not like that. No, the kind of temptation Jesus confronts is altogether different.

It's the temptation to aim too low, to be less than you can be. And I say "you" not "him" because in the end I believe this isn't just a story about Jesus. And it's not just theoretical.

Because temptation of this kind -- to aim too low, to be less than we can be -- is a universal human experience.

It comes to all of us at some point in our life: when we're hungry, starved for attention or validation or love. When we're seduced by the idol of power, or the need for recognition and adulation.

These things don't just happen to Jesus. We all face these same temptations, or variations on them, at some point in our life.

In this case, the tempter knows Jesus is hungry, so he hits him right where it hurts, right in the belly: "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread."

Feed yourself, in other words. Narrow your focus just to you. Because then you'll be less than you can be. And you will miss your calling to feed the multitudes.

A second temptation, different specifics, same logic: "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down; for the angels will save you."

Save yourself. Narrow your focus just to you. Because then you'll be less than you can be. And you will miss your calling to save the world.

And, finally, a third: "All these countries I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me."

Focus on yourself. Narrow your focus just to you. Because then you'll be less than you can be. And you will miss your calling to show the world that incarnate love reigns supreme over political power.

Clearly, even those of us here today who might overfunction just a tiny bit (and we are legion!), we know we're not Jesus. And despite sometimes conveying this impression, we also know we're not called to save the world.

But here's another key point: We're not Peter, James or John, either. They had their own callings to fulfill, their own temptations to face.

We have ours. The specifics are going to be different for each one of us, but there's a good chance the logic of those temptations will be the same.

Focus just on you. Focus on your hunger, or your need to be seen. Or on your need not to be seen. Focus on your anger at what's happening in the world, not on the people whose lives are being affected by it.

Or focus on that experience you had in high school, that thing that wounded you so badly and that continues to shape you deep into your adult life. Hang on to your anger and your shame about that and never let it go.

Whatever it may be, the tempter would have you keep the focus strictly on yourself, because then you'll be less than you can be. And you will miss your opportunity to fully engage your gifts in this sacred calling given to all of us: to spread faith, hope, love and joy throughout our corner of the world.

Let me show you what I mean. Valerie Kuar had every right to be angry, and no one would have blamed her for succumbing to the temptation to keep her energies focused right there, on her very personal, completely justified sense of outrage and indignation.

The roots of Valerie's anger go back more than 100 years -- 103 to be exact, when her grandfather, Kahar Singh, arrived in this country. A practitioner of the Sikh faith, Mr. Singh fled the grinding poverty and caste distinctions of his home country of India, to come here, to the United States, in search of a better life.

After sailing all the way across the Pacific, he disembarked from the ship that carried him and was promptly put in jail.

His crime? He just looked too different, with his brown skin and his ample beard and his prominent turban. Mr. Singh couldn't do anything about the color of his skin, but his beard and turban were signs of a deep devotion to his faith--a faith devoted to love and oneness.

But taken together, all of these exotic features were just too much for the official who met him: too different, too foreign. Mr. Singh looked less like a gentle practitioner of a beautiful faith and more like a threat. And so the official promptly threw this new arrival in jail.

Finally, on Christmas Eve, and through the intervention of an American born attorney, Valerie's grandfather's case was heard and he was released.

He migrated to central California, where he bought a parcel of land and turned to farming. He was also now free to practice his Sikh faith.

Then the world shifted. WWII broke out and, in one of the darkest chapters in American history, Mr. Singh's Japanese American neighbors were rounded up and sent to an internment camp, somewhere in the desert.

Mr. Singh took it upon himself to look after their farm, and he visited them when no one else would. As fear of the other rose in this country, he refused to stand down.

Granted neither Mr. Singh nor his neighbors were white or Christian, but it's like a textbook story of what American brotherhood looks like. I care for you, because you're my neighbor.

It's also like a story right out of the gospels. "But a Samaritan -- a foreign man who looked different -- a Samaritan came near the wounded man; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity."

But then, years later, the world shifted again. On September 11th, terrorists attacked NYC. In the explosion of fear and violence that followed, a man that Valerie called uncle -- another Sikh with an ample beard and prominent turban--was murdered because he looked too different, too foreign, less like the practitioner of a religion devoted to love and oneness and more like a terrorist.

Valerie stood up to the fear and the hate. She became a lawyer--like the man who first came to her grandfather's aid a hundred years earlier.

Some Americans went to war after 9/11, in the hope of protecting this country from further acts of terrorism. With Dr. King, I believe that violence cannot drive out violence but I understand and respect that choice.

For her part, Valerie became part of a generation of activists who worked to protect innocent people here at home from violence, and from deportations based on the color of their skin and not on the content of their character.

She devoted her career to making her homeland safer for everyone, especially for people who looked like her grandfather and uncle.

And then the world changed again: several years ago her son was born.

On Christmas Eve of this year -- the same night her grandfather was released from a jail cell more than a century ago -- she put out milk and cookies for Santa. After her son went to bed -- and there's just no other way to say this -- she gave into temptation: she ate the cookies and drank the milk.

But she did so for good reason. She wanted her son to wake up to a world that he believed was magical, and filled with wonder.

But even as the Christmas holiday came and went the world was changing again. School-aged children, white children, began yelling at other children with brown skin to go back where they came from. Mosques and synagogues were being torched and threatened with bomb scares.

The magic was rapidly draining out of the world and Valarie was suddenly afraid for her son's safety. Not that he'd be deported or thrown in jail for looking too foreign: he was an American citizen after all.

But because his skin was brown, she knew he was now at risk for being targeted and bullied and taunted and spit upon and told to go back where he came from.

She also began to fear that, if he followed in the tradition of her people, if he did grow a beard and don a turban, her son might someday be targeted as a terrorist, like her uncle was.

If you think that sounds melodramatic, I literally have news for you: According to the Washington Post, on Friday a 39-year-old Sikh man from the Seattle area was working on his car in his driveway when a man wearing a mask and brandishing a gun approached him, yelled, "Go back to your own country," and shot him. Fortunately, the wound was not fatal and the man will recover.

But you can understand why Valarie might be angry. And how easy it would be to give in to the temptation to nurse that anger, to feed it like some kind of inner dragon until it grew strong and powerful.

And why, when she got the invitation to speak at an interfaith service in response to such events, she might have said something she regretted. The service was being recorded and this was her chance to let the world know exactly how she felt.

But instead of offering an angry, hate filled rant that would have instantly gone viral, and incited more anger and hate in response, she faced that temptation down. And instead she told the story I just told you.

Yes, it feels like the world is changing, and that despite her best efforts, her beloved homeland is becoming darker and scarier and less welcoming.

But channeling her experience as a mother, she asked the assembled congregation, what if this darkness she feels, this darkness we all feel, what if it's not the darkness of the tomb, but the darkness of the womb?

What if all the people of faith and conscience in this country -- and we are millions and millions strong -- what if all of us together, not just women but men, too, what if we all begin to breath and to push, to engage in this labor together, so that something wonderful might be born out of the pain we're all now experiencing?

So that's what happened when Valarie stood up to her temptation to aim too low, to be less than she can be, to give in to the shadow inside of her rather than to give rise the light we're called to embody.

The hard news is that at some point, every one of us will face some version of this temptation, to be too small, to give up on who were called to be and give in to the temptation to be someone other than that.

The good news is that as we make our way through the wilderness, we don't have to be Jesus, or even Valarie, to face this temptation down, and to spread faith, hope, love and joy throughout our corner of the world.

We just have to be ourselves, and to remember that God is with us and for us every step of the way.