

This passage about the lilies of the field and the birds of the air brings to my mind a story from much earlier in Jesus' ministry – the temptations in the wilderness. We always read that one right as Lent begins, and it takes place right after Jesus was filled with the Holy Spirit at his baptism, and was called into his active ministry. This seems a fitting parallel as we enter into the season of Pentecost – when, as disciples, we've all been filled with the Holy Spirit and sent out into the world, as well. The story of Jesus temptations gives us direction for our ministries, for as you'll remember, before charging ahead Jesus took some serious time to pray alone in the wilderness – to gather himself before heading out into the many worries and troubles his tomorrows would bring. And after 40 days of fasting, he was very, very hungry, and at that very vulnerable moment, the devil appeared to him to tempt him away from his service to God.

The devil says to Jesus, "Man, you're famished. Hey, I can see you've got a pretty special relationship with God going here. Show me how much he loves you. Turn all these stones into bread." But Jesus says, "One does not live by bread alone." Then he says, "Well then, look here – let me show you all the powerful kingdoms of the world. This is all mine you know, and I can give power to anyone I want. If you serve me instead of God, it can all be yours." And Jesus says, "I worship and serve God alone." Finally the devil takes Jesus up to the pinnacle of the temple and says, "Throw yourself off. You know God won't let you fall. God's angels will protect you, and then everyone will see how special you really are." But Jesus says, "Do not put God's love to the test." And after resisting these three temptations, the devil disappeared, and angels came to tend to Jesus.

Now today we heard part of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, which he gave later on in his ministry. And you can hear how deeply that early wilderness experience still informs him. "Do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear." Jesus knew from his experience in the wilderness how tempted we are to focus our lives completely on things we need – on doing and accumulating – sowing, reaping, gathering supplies into barns. And because of this we are tempted to measure God's love for us by how much we are able to prosper – by how many rocks we can turn into bread. Everyday we are tempted to worship the things we have instead of God. But as Jesus told the devil back in the wilderness, one doesn't live by bread alone.

"And why do you worry about clothing? Can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life?" Again, Jesus understood how tempted we are to try to seek control over what happens in our lives. Whether by fretting and worrying or by literally manipulating situations and people, he knows how much we can be tempted to measure God's love for us by how much control we have in the world – by how many kingdoms we rule. Every day we are tempted to worship ourselves and our own power instead of God. But as Jesus told the devil back in the wilderness, we are to worship and serve only God.

"Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow. I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these." Jesus knew how good we want to look in this world – how we want others to notice how competent, how likable, how clever, unique and together we are. And he knew how tempted we are to adjust our masks to get the reactions we crave from others – and to measure God's love for us by how much we can get the world to love us. Every day we are tempted to worship the world and its reactions instead of God. But as Jesus told the devil back in the wilderness, do not put God's love to the test.

Jesus knew from deep personal experience that we humans are tempted to spend all our energy serving what we do and what we have, serving our own abilities and our own power, and serving the world around us and its opinions and reactions – instead of serving God. And you can't serve God and mammon. Mammon – from the Greek, Mamonas – a word used for the false Gods of riches, avarice, and worldly gain. The false idols of accumulation, control, appearances – things that take up so much room in our minds, hearts and souls that they squeeze out any possibility of leaving any room in us for the mystery of God.

Now you may be thinking when you hear Jesus advocating being as carefree as birds and as simple as lilies, “We’ve got responsibilities.” It was God’s own self that gave us the responsibility of stewarding this entire planet. And with all this responsibility on our shoulders, aren’t Jesus’ words a little dreamy and unrealistic? How can you possibly flit around like a bird without a care in the world and still take care of everything that obviously needs your attention? Sit in the sun like a lily of the field? How I wish!

But I don’t think Jesus is advocating a different reality. I think he’s reminding us that there’s a deeper one. “Do not worry, saying ‘what will we eat?’ or ‘what will we drink?’ or ‘what will we wear?’ Indeed your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. But instead of striving for them first, strive first for the kingdom of God and God’s righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.”

We have all, by necessity, learned to be stewards of our lives – stewards of worldly things, and indeed God calls us to a variety of ministries in this world to do just that – to steward God’s creation. But as servants of Christ, stewarding this world, we are also, as Paul puts it, called to be stewards of God’s mysteries – responsible and trustworthy in tending the deeper reality of God while living and working in the midst of this mammon world. We are called to put our own troubles and our own triumphs into a larger perspective – into the context of God’s eternal Kingdom.

Oh Lord, my heart is not lifted up, my eyes are not raised too high; I do not occupy myself with things too great and too marvelous for me.

But I have stilled and quieted my soul; like a weaned child with its mother, like a weaned child is my soul within me.

O Israel, trust in the LORD now and forevermore.

In our vulnerable moments of worry or trouble, we are always tempted, as Jesus was, to turn to ourselves to find comfort – in what we can do, what we can control, how we appear – rather than turning to God. But as the psalmist said, we are like God’s weaned children. We can get up and walk on our own two feet, eat on our own, make choices of our own. We are not dependent infants. But we are still God’s children. And like a weaned child who has come back to sit on its mother’s lap, and who is completely at peace in her loving arms, we can trust in God to provide for our deepest needs. At Jesus’ baptism, God said, “This is my child, my beloved, in whom I am well pleased.” And during his time in the desert, Jesus came to believe that was really true. And so he was able, clearly and decisively, to know who he really served, and it wasn’t himself. He knew, and in the Sermon on the Mount he is telling us that we too, can always come back to God’s loving embrace in all times and in all places. As servants of Christ and stewards of God’s mysteries, we can completely trust in the Lord, now and forevermore.