

Temptation in the Wilderness

Matthew 4:1-11

March 1, 2020 First Sunday of Lent

Lenten Series: Journeys in the Wilderness

Rev. Cynthia Cochran-Carney, First Presbyterian Church, San Rafael, CA

Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. He fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished.

The tempter came and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread." But he answered, "It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.'"

Then the devil took him to the holy city and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down; for it is written, 'He will command his angels concerning you,' and 'On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.'" Jesus said to him, "Again it is written, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'"

Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor; and he said to him, "All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me." Jesus said to him, "Away with you, Satan! For it is written, 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.'" Then the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him.

Matthew 4:1-11

This story is always told on the first Sunday of Lent in the cycle of the church year. It seems far removed from 21st century imagery, but it certainly has influenced artists and comedians. Remember Flip Wilson? One of my favorite comedians. One of his characters was Geraldine. She was always doing things her husband did not like. Her excuse – The Devil made me do it! Even though we can laugh about it, our scripture today takes us to a deeper place of testing, temptation and identity.

We enter into this story of Jesus, still damp from his baptism, being led by the Spirit into the wilderness. There is a sense that this is a story of the messiness of humanity — both Jesus' and our own — that we grapple with during Lent. We begin on Ash Wednesday, acknowledging via the imposition of ashes that are dust and to dust we will return, that we will die, that our bodies will fail us no matter how we attempt to preserve them with medicine, exercise, cosmetics, or mindfulness. Jesus' humanity is being tested.

We go with Jesus and venture into the wilderness. Like Moses, like the Israelites after their exodus from Egypt as they wandered 40 years. We begin a journey inward, a journey to explore who Jesus is, who we are, and what our shared humanity requires of us now.

The Jesus we encounter in the first week of our journey is a thirty-year-old carpenter who has hardly the strength left to stand, much less to tower over the withered landscape. As the writer of Matthew's Gospel puts it, this Jesus is "famished" after forty days of fasting and testing. Physically, he's at the end of his strength. Socially, he's alone and friendless. Spiritually, he is struggling to consolidate his identity as the glow and wetness of his baptism dries.

Matthew offers some important connections for us in the story told in 3 of the 4 gospels. This story is drawing on a familiar tradition of religious persons or heroic persons who not only contend with maintaining their integrity in the face of human opposition, but first must undergo an ordeal to prove themselves before being ready to perform their task.

The Greek word – πειράζω is sometimes translated "tempt," especially when it is associated with the devil, and other times "test." On the whole, I think "test" is a better translation for Matthew's use. (1)

And did you notice that the devil, the Tester, quotes scripture to Jesus? What this dialog proves among other things is that the devil is biblically literate. He knows exactly where to find the Bible verses he needs to put Jesus to the test, but Jesus knows more than what the scripture says. Jesus knows how to do what the Hebrew texts says, which is how he passes his wilderness exam. Maybe that is one of our tests – how to live lives of compassion and love.

Every time the devil offered him more--more bread, more power, more protection--Jesus turned him down. No to the bread, Jesus says, no to the kingdoms, no to the angelic bodyguards. He is full up, he says, on worshipping God and serving only the Holy One.

Let's think about where the test took place--the wilderness--because I have an idea that every one of us has already been there. Maybe it just looked like a hospital waiting room to you, or the day you lost your job or the first night at home alone after your spouse died. It may even have been a kind of desert in the middle of your own chest, where you begged for a word from God and heard nothing but the wheezing bellows of your own breath.

Wildernesses come in so many shapes and sizes that the only way you can really tell you are in one is to look around for what you normally count on to save your life and come up empty. No food. No earthly power. No special protection—vulnerable, open.

Needless to say, this is not a situation many of us seek. Most of us, in fact, spend a lot of time and money trying to stay out of it. Sooner or later, every one of us will get to take our own wilderness exam, our own trip to the desert to discover who we really are and what our lives are really about. One of the wilderness times in my life was when Jeffrey and I had been starting a new church in the Pocono Mountains of PA. We were worshipping in a middle school, had Bible study at the ice cream parlor, choir practice at our house. The multi-ethnic congregation did grow, but not large enough to be sustained. After 4.5 years, the church was closed and Jeffrey and I were unemployed. We did not know what was next. We lived in MD for a time with Jeffrey's older aunt. I prayed a lot, I cried a lot. I wondered if our ministry as pastors was over. It felt like being in the wilderness and we did not know for how long. Now not every wilderness prayer has this answer but for us the answer came: New Jersey. I was called to be the pastor of Willow Grove Pres. Church in Scotch Plains, NJ and it was a blessing. We were there for almost 12 years. I learned some deep lessons that stayed with me after my time in the wilderness about myself and my faith.

Wilderness can bring many different lessons to our lives. Even if no one ever wants to go there, and even if those of us who end up there want out again as soon as possible, the wilderness is still one of the most reality-based, spirit-filled, life-changing places a person can be.

What did that long, famishing stretch in the wilderness do to him? It freed him--from all attempts to distract him from his true purpose, from hungry craving for things with no power to give him life. After forty days in the wilderness, Jesus had not only learned to manage his appetites; he had also learned to trust the Spirit that had led him there to lead him out again, with the kind of clarity and grit he could not have found anywhere else. He became clear about his true identity and his calling.

From Ash Wednesday to Easter Sunday, what does it mean for us to take time to be clear about our identity? Following Jesus means doing some things that simplify our life or taking a moral inventory or letting go of something or committing to a specific practice.

"Lent," from an English word meaning "spring"--not just a reference to the crocuses pushing their ways out of the ground in the season before Easter, but also to the greening of the human soul--pruned with

repentance, fertilized with fasting from certain foods or distractions, spritzed with self-reflection, mulched with prayer. I know people who give up watching television or Facebook or shopping or eating while standing up or alcohol or chocolate --to give up whatever habits or substances they use to keep themselves from feeling what it really feels like to live the kind of lives they are living.

If you have spent a lot of time and/or money trying to acquire whatever it takes to grow your soul without seeing any new buds, then maybe time in the wilderness is worth a try--a few weeks of choosing to live on less, not more--of practicing subtraction instead addition--not because your regular life is bad but because you want to make sure it is your real life--the one you long to be living--which can be hard to do when you're living with a calendar or worry or fear. I'm just saying they are distractions--things to reach for when a person is too tired, too sad, or too afraid to enter the wilderness of the present moment--to wonder what it's really about.

We live in a culture of distraction. The PBS documentary series Frontline produced a documentary a few years ago called "The Persuaders" that struck me. It examined the evolution of modern advertising. In years past, advertisements boasted of the quality of the product. Not too long ago, they would seek celebrity endorsements. Today, however, advertisements make a promise less about the quality of a product and more about an imagined lifestyle that owning the product can somehow provide. By owning this kind of car, or using this kind of wineglass, advertisers suggest, we will discover our identity and move closer to having a meaningful life.

On the face of it, such advertising sounds ludicrous -- how can using a particular laptop or phone or car can give you meaning? Yet the documentary suggests that we are so starved for a sense of meaning and purpose that we make many of our purchasing decisions based our hope that the story they tell us -- that we will feel less alone, less incomplete, and more whole if we simply by their product -- is true. We should be clear, it's not that the stuff itself is bad, but rather that we expect too much from it. As one person said in the documentary said, "In the end it's just a laptop or a pair of running shoes. They may be great, but they're not actually going to fill those needs." (2)

So we begin again in this season of Lent - looking at ourselves, looking at our world. Noticing what distracts us and noticing that ways we feel like the wandering in the wilderness. Today we come recognizing true hunger and what can really feed us and world.

- Hungry for a world where people know they are beloved by God
- Hungry for a world where children and young people are valued
- Hungry for a world where people of all races live and work together
- Hungry for a world where assault guns are not brought into schools
- Hungry for a world where people's health and well-being are valued by leaders and governments.

Lent invites us to ask whether our values and actions are moving us closer or further from God's vision for our lives and the world. Lent reminds us of the need to put first things first. We are invited to cultivate simplicity and self-awareness and awaken to the Spirit's wildness even in the wilderness.

1) D. Mark Davis, "Will This Be on the Test?" 2/28/2020

<https://leftbehindandlovingit.blogspot.com/2014/03/will-this-be-on-test.html>

2) David Lose, "Into Temptation," 3/7/11, workingpreaching.org

<http://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=1488>

I am grateful for inspiration from Barbara Brown Taylor's sermon "Wilderness Exam" for this sermon.

https://day1.org/weekly-broadcast/5d9b820ef71918cdf2002924/the_wilderness_exam