

**“The Way of Faith”
March 10, 2019
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This morning’s text comes from the gospel of Luke, just before Jesus began his ministry. Prior to this text, the writer of Luke has introduced us to John the Baptist who had a powerful ministry of his own, yet he explained to the crowds that someone more powerful than he was coming. He then baptized Jesus to both introduce and name the significance of the *humanity* of Jesus. God would then respond to John’s pronouncement by naming the significance of Jesus’ *divinity* by proclaiming, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”¹

The writer of Luke, in an effort to ensure that we did not miss the meaning of who Jesus is, then lists a long genealogy that traces Jesus’ family tree from Joseph all the way back to the patriarchs of Jacob, Isaac, and Abraham and finally to Adam. In case we needed any other proof that Jesus is the Son of God, we encounter this morning’s text where Jesus comes face to face with some of our earthly temptations in preparation for his ministry among humanity. I invite you now to hear God’s word to you today as found in the gospel of Luke, chapter 4, verses 1-13:

Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, ²where for forty days he was tempted by the devil. He ate nothing at all during those days, and when they were over, he was famished. ³The devil said to him, “If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread.”⁴Jesus answered him, “It is written, ‘One does not live by bread alone.’”⁵Then the devil led him up and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. ⁶And the devil said to him, “To you I will give their glory and all this authority; for it has been given over to me, and I give it to anyone I please. ⁷If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours.”⁸Jesus answered him, “It is written, ‘Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.’”⁹Then the devil took him to Jerusalem, and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, “If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here, ¹⁰for it is written, ‘He will command his angels concerning you, to protect you,’ ¹¹and ‘On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.’”¹²Jesus answered him, “It is said, ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’”¹³When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time.

This is the word of the Lord, thanks be to God.

Today is the first Sunday of Lent, the season where we gather around the Word of God and walk day by day with Jesus through his ministry – the highs and the lows, the arrest, the crucifixion and death, and finally, expectantly, to an empty tomb where we discover the miracle of eternal life. As our world gets busier and more distracted, it is hard to maintain

¹ Luke 4:22.



any continuity or focus on this journey. There are far too many more palatable activities to pass our time or errands we deem more important.

As someone who formerly worked in the advertising industry, I can tell you that Lent is one of the toughest seasons to “sell” in the church. I often get asked why we have this depressing season even as the signs of spring and new life are getting ready to burst forth? If Jesus died for our sins, why do we have to confess them when we really just want to be comforted and uplifted, when we want to skip to praise and give thanks to God? Isn't life tough enough without willfully entering into this negative headspace?

It has been the truth since before the beginning of the church that one cannot genuinely and truthfully arrive to the joy of Easter morning without the trial, without acknowledging our alienation from our God, without the agonizing pounding of the crucifixion, without the complete loss of our Lord. We cannot claim a new identity while resting comfortably in the old one. Anyone who has lived for a time on this earth will tell you that there is always devastating loss to be experienced before anything new can be born. The source of living a genuine, wholehearted life, the source of truly authentic worship or of any praise we might offer begins in the wilderness with Jesus. This is terrible news to those of us who are relatively comfortable right now and enjoying the fruits of life, but it is excellent, life saving news for those of us who have found ourselves thrust into the pits of despair. And so once again, we begin this Lent like every Lent, in the wilderness with Jesus.

During my morning workouts, I've been watching the BBC's Planet Earth series on Netflix. If you have not seen this show and you are in need of some breath-taking images of creation, I would highly recommend you watching. I saw an episode recently focused entirely on deserts. What looks dead, dehydrated, and barren is actually a habitat of some of the most strange and resilient creatures on the planet. The narrator explains in detail the fragile mechanisms needed to give life to these specially adapted plants and animals. Water is hard to come by, if not non-existent. The heat of the day is deathly to most creatures, forcing most of life to come out only under the cover of darkness. The lack of landscape is disorienting, often leading to the tragedy of a young animal being separated from its family and left to the elements of the wilderness. Noticeably missing in this episode, of course, are human beings who are far too fragile and needy to survive in such hot and desperate circumstances.

And yet, this was where Jesus went first before testing his miraculous powers and healing hands among communities of strangers. It would seem that he needed to test the finite boundaries of what it meant to wear human skin in the face of so much heat and to be so vulnerable in a land with no shelter. We have no indication that he brought supplies with him as he was completely famished by the time he encountered the devil. Jesus was as defenseless as human beings can get when he came face to face with one of the most powerful forces of evil in the universe.

And this is where temptation has its way with most of us. It is precisely when we have severe financial difficulties that we are presented with opportunities to steal. It is when our marriages are at their lowest point when an attractive person offers a listening ear. It

is when we are in the most physical or emotional pain of our lives when addictive drugs become most accessible to us.

So, we could hardly blame Jesus if he gave into his temptations, especially for those of us who have grown up with the comforts of air conditioning, unlimited access to clean water and delicious food, surrounded by lush vegetation and restful retreats to the mountains or the beach. We know we wouldn't make it far in the desert, and it's impressive that Jesus has come as far as he has. And really, if you look closely at each test, they could all be well intended offerings and could be properly utilized if placed in the hands of the Son of God.

To begin with, the devil tells Jesus to command a stone to become a loaf of bread. On the face of it, Jesus would not only relieve his physical discomfort and nourish himself for ministry, but think of all the hungry people he could feed with all those rocks of the wilderness. And then the devil offers Jesus power over all the kingdoms of the world. Given the corruption of the Roman Empire and every kingdom that has followed including our own, doesn't it seem to be in our best interest that Jesus would be in charge of it all? Finally, the devil invites Jesus to prove he is the Son of God by throwing himself off the top of the temple in Jerusalem. To have done so would have immediately proven to all the religious leaders that Jesus *was*, in fact, the Messiah they had been waiting for, saving him the conflict that was to come. Giving into these temptations seems like a much easier and more expedient way of accomplishing Jesus' goals than the three-year rocky journey on which he was about to embark.

When we envision this morning's scripture, we might first picture a red devil with horns poking at an ethereal invulnerable Jesus when in reality, evil came in the form of an empathetic partner in ministry (who knows his Bible, by the way). Temptation came to a dirty, exhausted, dehydrated, fully human Jesus. The rocky terrain had no doubt beaten Jesus up and after 40 long, excruciating days, he had a decision to make: faithfulness to God which has left him hungry, powerless, and defenseless or the easier path of least resistance that would appear on the surface to achieve his same goals.

At the heart of it, that is what temptation is. It is taking the easy way out. At a former church where I served, our Church Administrator, Freda, had a big red "Easy" button sitting on her desk. It was a freebie from the office supply store Staples, and you might remember the advertising campaign where workers at the store were solving peoples' problems right and left. When you hit this red button, a man's voice said, "That was easy," and Freda loved to hit it when there was an easy fix for a problem. It is a brilliant marketing campaign, because that is what we all crave. We are all searching for the latest appliance to make our lives easier, the quick fix to our current problems, the path of least resistance to our life's goals. In an age of intense pressure for results, efficiency, and high productivity, we constantly seek the greatest outcome for the least amount of effort.

But at what cost? Do the ends justify the means? What do we lose when we take shortcuts? If Jesus had given in to the Great Tempter, maybe some immediate relief and perhaps even a little good would have happened on the surface. But the choice to give in would have come at the cost of his identity as the Son of God. He would have given his power and

authority away and become the Son of Satan instead. Perhaps there would have still been some sort of “ministry” of Jesus. But it would ultimately have come at the cost of humanity. Because there would have been no Resurrection. No good news. Just sin. Just death and self-destruction. And Jesus loved us far too much for that. He knew the work of the wilderness was preparing him for the work of the Resurrection. And that seems like work worth doing.

The invitation of this text to all of us is to spend some time in the wilderness. Commit to the process of Lent. Like Jesus, we are to carry nothing on the journey, and we are to commit to 40 days of contemplation and prayer. Enter into those difficult places, the harsh places, the places that don't feel survivable, the places that make us feel the most vulnerable. This is a time of pondering temptations – those we have overcome and especially those where we have failed. Lent is a time for confessing our failures, not as a source of shame, but as a way of learning, a way of gathering wisdom so you'll know how to do better next time. Pastor and theologian Barbara Brown Taylor in her book *Altar in the World* (the book we are studying during Lent) says, “Wisdom is not gained by knowing what is right. Wisdom is gained by practicing what is right.”²

And this is how we prepare for ministry in God's name. We engage in practices that enable us to learn by doing. We will have successes and failures, and we have assurance that God will use every last piece of it. Nothing gets wasted. This is how we develop the strength to lay healing hands on those who are ailing, to feed those who are hungry, to champion the oppressed and ultimately to pick up our crosses to follow Jesus all the way to the crucifixion.

I'm wondering, what are some the wilderness places in your lives? Some of us have actually been thrust into the wilderness against our own will: through a betrayal, a job loss, a diagnosis or injury, or the loss of someone dear to us. Some of us have been avoiding the wilderness altogether, because it's too uncomfortable and politically charged: racial reconciliation, immigration reform, homelessness, climate change, defining and paying a living wage to our workers, etc. These are just a few of the wilderness places about which we would rather remain in denial.

Our congregation, as we continue to be without a Sr. Pastor, is walking through a wilderness of its own right now. Because of the confidentiality of the search process, there are not many details that I can reveal. But over the last couple of weeks, I had hoped to share a promising update with you. Unfortunately, we still do not have good news to share, and we don't know when we will. The scorch of the sun strikes at our backs, our mouths run dry, our stomachs growl. Rachel and I feel this, our Interim Pastor Search Committee, despite their heroic efforts, feel this, our Session and Deacons feel this, you feel this. It is exhausting work. It is sad work. It is angry work. It is frustrating work. But I promise you this: It work worth doing. And when we are vulnerable, temptations will come to visit.

² “The Practice of Waking Up to God.” *An Altar in the World: a Geography of Faith*, by Barbara Brown Taylor, HarperOne, 2010, pp. 14.

There are bound to be some easy buttons that will pop up now and again. But as people of faith, we know that taking the easy way out is not an option. It is not the way of God, and it is not the way of faith.

The inescapable truth is this: if we are to ever have hope of healing from betrayals or losses, if we ever want to heal the divisions that are tearing humanity apart, it is only through the gritty, tiring work of fasting and praying in the wilderness. It is the process of boldly entering into those scary places that threaten to lay us bare where we will learn what we are made of, and most importantly, we will learn what God is made of. We are called to resist the easy button, the shortcut or the alternate route. The long, courageous walk into the wilderness is the way of faith.

Lest you think you walk alone, do not despair of this difficult journey. Even Jesus, the Son of God, did not walk into the wilderness alone. Our scripture tells us that the Holy Spirit was the one leading Jesus into that wilderness, and he went in filled to the brim with the Holy Spirit. That was what sustained him and gave him the strength to resist temptation when he was at the breaking point. And that is what will carry us through.

Friends in Christ, we weren't built to survive the wilderness alone, but we can take the way of faith empowered by the Holy Spirit. Just as Jesus was dripping from his baptism and called Beloved by God, so are we. We are named and claimed by God in the waters of Baptism, and we are God's beloved. So as we embark on this journey into the wilderness of Lent, I want to share a poem from Jan Richardson that was food for me on this journey, and I hope it will be for you, too:

Beloved Is Where We Begin³

If you would enter
into the wilderness,
do not begin
without a blessing.
Do not leave
without hearing
who you are:
Beloved,
named by the One
who has traveled this path
before you.
Do not go
without letting it echo
in your ears,
and if you find
it is hard
to let it into your heart,
do not despair.

³ <http://paintedprayerbook.com/2016/02/11/lent-1-beloved-is-where-we-begin/>

That is what
this journey is for.
I cannot promise
this blessing will free you
from danger,
from fear,
from hunger
or thirst,
from the scorching
of sun
or the fall
of the night.

But I can tell you
that on this path
there will be help.

I can tell you
that on this way
there will be rest.

I can tell you
that you will know
the strange graces
that come to our aid
only on a road
such as this,
that fly to meet us
bearing comfort
and strength,
that come alongside us
for no other cause
than to lean themselves
toward our ear
and with their
curious insistence
whisper our name:

Beloved.

Beloved.

Beloved.

—Jan Richardson
from *Circle of Grace*

Amen.