

1 Lent
Christ and Grace
Robin Teasley

Luke 4:1-13
March 10, 2019

After his baptism, Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, where for forty days he was tempted by the devil.

Jesus, the Holy Spirit, and the devil go into a desert. It sounds like the beginning of a great joke! While this account is in Matthew, Mark, and Luke, we have no way of knowing how they heard about this, because no one else was mentioned as being there who could witness the event. But it was deemed important enough for all three gospel writers to include it, so here it is. Now, what do we do with it?

We could spend a long time debating if it is true, who saw it, and who recounted it (my guess here would be Jesus). We could argue the existence of the devil and where the devil gets his power.

But on this first Sunday of Lent, I don't think those questions matter so much. Here we have an account of Jesus that reveals his humanity, that shows that Jesus was tempted in every way, just as we are. Jesus knows something about temptation and the wilderness, and God knows we all find ourselves in a wilderness from time to time. But what is important for us to know is that we are not alone in the wilderness with the devil. The Spirit is there with us.

The season of Lent always begins with Jesus entering the wilderness. I suspect that's why we often use this imagery for our own Lenten journeys, why we see Lent as an opportune time to explore our own wilderness. Oh we may not be in a literal desert, we may not be in the midst of a major crisis this week, we may not even be feeling particularly tempted this morning, but there is wilderness inside each one of us, if we will only admit it. Places we would rather not go, topics in our hearts we like to avoid. Lent can be a time when we consider how the world tempts us in ways we might not even realize; a time when we can honestly consider what our personal wildernesses and temptations might be.

Forty days is "bible speak" for a long time, or for an appropriate time, and has always had great symbolic meaning in scripture. Early Jewish hearers of the gospel narrative would have connected the forty days of Jesus' desert retreat with the forty days Noah was adrift in the flood waters, the forty days and nights that Moses fasted before coming down the mountain with the ten commandments, the forty years that the Israelites wandered lost in the desert before reaching the Promised Land, and the forty days that Elijah wandered hungry in the wilderness.

God's people were familiar with wilderness and temptation. Most of us are as well. To set aside forty days to intentionally explore our own wilderness and what it is that tempts us can be a powerful reminder to us that we are all in continual need of God's mercy and love.

When we hear how Jesus was tempted, at first we may not think that has much to do with us today. I mean, when was the last time you were tempted to turn a stone into bread, or offered all the kingdoms of the world, or placed on top of a steeple and told to jump? Jesus was starving, he

was *famished*, after forty days of fasting and so the temptation to turn a stone into bread must have been strong. If we have never fasted for a few days or even 24 hours, then perhaps we can't relate to how hungry we would be after 40 days without food. But maybe there are other things we are starving for in life.

What are the empty places inside of us longing to be filled? Some of us are starving for attention, popularity, or power and authority. Others of us seek more material goods so that we will appear successful, so shopping can be a temptation. Perhaps we are so intent on meeting our own needs that we push aside the needs and feelings of others, harming them in the process, which can create a vast wilderness in our relationships.

Jesus was tempted to stop worshiping God in return for worldly power, authority and glory. When do our desires for the things of the world override our generosity or our common sense? There are times when our need for bigger, better, and more causes us to use our resources wrongly. There may be times when we make choices to put our faith, our prayer time, or caring for our neighbor on the back burner.

Jesus was tempted to throw himself from the pinnacle of the temple to put God to the test. We can all probably admit to testing God, to making bargains with God - if God would just answer our prayer, solve our dilemma, fix the mess we have made, then we promise to go back to church, to pray more often, to give more to charity. Or we have those little inner conversations with ourselves – you know, the ones where we try to rationalize our behaviors, find excuses, or blame someone else for our own behavior. Blaming has become a national pastime, hasn't it? It's all too tempting to cast blame on someone else to avoid acknowledging our own mistakes.

So what does your wilderness look like? Maybe it's a struggle with addiction. I had a seminary professor who said that we are all addicted to something. Some of us are all too familiar with that struggle in its most dangerous forms, and many of us are experiencing a lesser form of that as we try giving up things like desserts or coffee or our favorite time wasters for Lent. Perhaps some of us find ourselves in the wilderness of a broken relationship, a job loss, or grief. The wilderness can be a dry, parched place and when we are in it, almost everything and everyone irritates us like grains of sand in our shoes. Temptation can be as relentless as the hot, searing, desert sun. Those times when we find everyone and everything to be an irritation like so much coarse sand, may be the very times when we need to stop and explore the possibility that *we* are the ones in the wilderness.

During Lent, you will notice that there is sand in the baptismal font. You are invited to touch the sand on your way to communion, or before or after worship. Rub it between your fingers. Let it remind you to think and pray about the wildernesses in your life, whatever they are. May the sand also remind you of Jesus in the wilderness, full of the Holy Spirit, who knows our every temptation, who has been where we are and understands.

In these 40 days, draw close to God and allow God to draw close to you. Be assured that though our lives may be full of dry, parched places, we are never alone in the wilderness. Jesus is with us and we are full of the Holy Spirit, who will lead us, in the end, back to the living water that quenches our real thirst, back to the river of life. Amen.