

Our Wilderness Journey

What is More Important Than Your Spiritual Wellbeing?

(Luke 4:1–13 NRSV) Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, {2} where 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. {3} The devil said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread." {4} Jesus answered him, "It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone.'" {5} Then the devil led him up and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. {6} And 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. {7} If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours." {8} Jesus answered him, "It is written, 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.'" {9} Then 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, {10} for it is written, 'He will command his angels concerning you, to protect you,' {11} and 'On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.'" {12} Jesus answered him, "It is said, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'" {13} When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time.

Lent is an interesting time of the year.

Originating in the fourth century of the church, the season of Lent spans 40 days (excluding Sundays), beginning on Ash Wednesday and climaxing during Holy Week with Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, and concluding Saturday before Easter.

Originally, Lent was the time of preparation for those who were to be baptized into the church. It was a time of concentrated study and prayer before their baptism, which was to take place during the Easter Vigil, --- the first service of Easter which takes place typically after sundown on the Saturday before Easter.

This was the time when those who had been separated from the Church, for whatever reason, would prepare to rejoin the community.

Today, Lent is marked as a time of prayer and preparation to celebrate Easter.

Why 40 days?

The number 40 is connected with many biblical events:

- It rained for 40 days during the time of Noah
- Moses spent 40 days on the mountain receiving the law
- The Hebrews wandered for 40 years in the wilderness
- There are 40 days between the resurrection and Jesus ascension into heaven
- And Jesus spent 40 days in the wilderness preparing for His ministry by facing the temptations that could lead him to abandon his mission and calling

Christians today use this period of time for introspection, self examination, and repentance.

Lent has traditionally been marked by penitential prayer, fasting, and almsgiving.

Many of you may still observe a rigid schedule of fasting on certain days during Lent, especially the giving up of meat, alcohol, sweets, and other types of food.

Other traditions do not place as great an emphasis on fasting, but focus on doing something or taking something on such as charitable deeds, especially helping those in physical need with food and clothing, or simply the giving of money to charities.

Most Christian churches that observe Lent -- focus on it as a time of prayer, especially penance, repenting for failures and sin as a way to focus on the need for God and God's grace.

Lent is really a preparation to celebrate God's marvelous redemption at Easter, and the resurrected life that we live, and hope for, as Christians.

So for the next six weeks, Nathan and I are going to join with you as we journey toward Jerusalem and the empty tomb.

As we do this, it is our intention to focus on the wilderness.

In our story today Jesus goes off into the wilderness. The truth is, many of us, get lost in our own wilderness every day.

Over this season of Lent we are going to look at a variety of wildernesses that we encounter.

- ❖ Temptation
- ❖ Disappointments and Grudges
- ❖ Unfulfilled Promises
- ❖ Arrogance
- ❖ Wrong Priorities

Because the truth is --- we must go through the wilderness --- if we want to arrive at Easter.

Let me share with you a profound and yet simple truth → It takes a death to have a resurrection.

So if we want to experience resurrection → part of us must first die!

But the problem is: we want it all!

We want to be taken care of

We want to be fed

We want to have fame and fortune

We want the assurance that God is with us

We want resurrection without a death - without cost.

And because of that we feel frightened and alone.

We wonder if God even cares about us.

You see, our logic tells us that if we had all the things that the world promises to us --- then we would be happy.

And since we already have all that the world offers --- we possess so much "stuff" and yet are still not happy --- the result is --- the result is that we question --- we whine --- we walk away from God.

The church tells us that we can get back into a relationship with God --- but the truth is we are not really sure that is what we want.

Because to get there we know that there is a price that has to be paid --- that there has to be a death so that we might experience that resurrection that God offers to us.

So we create a kind of détente.

We keep God at arm's length so that we don't have to change.

Our scripture story this morning is a powerful parable for us all.

Jesus, after receiving his invitation from God → goes into the wilderness seeking to understand just what this call is all about.

As all of us know – and have experienced what Jesus experienced → that before we can make a life altering decision, we must first deal with temptation.

Jesus faced the same temptations that you and I face

Temptation is always about trying to take short cuts.

We think that somehow we are different from the rest of the world and that those short-cuts were made especially for us.

Tiger Woods

The first temptation that Jesus faces the devil challenges him in the story:
 “If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread.”

Most of us do not have to deal with the hunger that a 40 day fast would produce → but what is it that he is really being tempted with?

It seems to me that the first temptation considers who I am in this world.

Do I think that I am I so important that the world cannot get along without me?
 Or, am I a child of God with a unique role in making the world a better place?

That temptation is present every day as we choose our place in the world.

In the second temptation:

the devil led him up and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. {6} And 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. {7} If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours."

The second temptation addresses my actions in the world.

Am I going to lead an unreflective life, merely moving through each day?

Or am I going to explore how I might act for the greatest good?

In the third temptation:

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, {10} for it is written, 'He will command his angels concerning you, to protect you,' {11} and 'On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.'"

The third temptation requires examination of my motivations for acting.

Am I doing what I do just to get ahead, oblivious to how others are affected?

Or am I conscious of my connections with both friends and enemies?

What this story illustrates is that our wilderness journey begins with our selfishness and our self-concern.

And this kind of wilderness is never very much fun.

Looking at our motives --- examining why we do what we do - is never a very pleasant task.

The wilderness that we find ourselves in is not a comfortable place. It is not a fun place to be. We feel very far from God.

But we need to remember → God has not left us → God has not withheld God's love to us.

It is us who have wandered.

And the question that we have to ask ourselves, if we want to navigate through this wilderness → What is more important in your life than your spiritual wellbeing?

Take a moment and think about that --- maybe even find a spot on your worship folder where you can write down your answer.

What is more important in your life than your spiritual wellbeing?

It is a trick question, of course.

Because the answer must be that there is NOTHING more important.

And I know, some of you are saying --- wait a minute --- my family is more important than me. Or maybe you put something else first.

Have you ever flown on an airplane?

I love the little shtick that they go through in terms of the safety requirements.

On my last flight, the steward obviously wanted to be a comedian, because he gave the whole safety lecture as if it were a stand-up routine.

But the information that they share is important.

And they always tell you that in the event of loss of pressure in the cabin that an air mask will drop down --- and you are to do what?

Put yours on first

Because unless we take care of ourselves - we cannot take care of others.

Our first step in the wilderness has to be seeing our own self-centeredness about realizing that are not the important person in the world, and then to have the desire to make our spiritual life a priority.

Me learning Hebrew

But it is going to take work.

You can skate through Lent as if it is just another season.

And, of course that is always the temptation.

Or you can take this season seriously, and use it as truly a time of reflection and growth.

The choice is yours.