

OUR WILDERNESS JOURNEY

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Feb. 21, 2010

Luke 4:1-13

First Presbyterian Church
Uvalde, TX

Today is the first Sunday in Lent. Lent is the forty days that precede Easter, and this first Sunday in Lent begins a period of preparation for the Christian mystery that is central to our faith—the death and resurrection of Jesus.

The word Lent is from the Latin meaning, “to lengthen.” Lent occurs during the time of year when our days are beginning to lengthen, when we have more light than darkness.

Henri Nouwen said, “The season of Lent is the time when winter and spring struggle with each other for dominance.” We have seen that with our weather here in Uvalde, haven’t we?

The three synoptic gospels: Matthew, Mark, and Luke, all link the experience of Jesus in the desert with the baptism of Jesus, which was presented earlier in their accounts, and all three evangelists mention that Jesus is “led by the Spirit,” and tempted by the devil.

This Sunday’s lectionary reading is sometimes called “The Temptation of Jesus,” and it is important to note that it is placed directly on the heels of the Baptism of Jesus.

In Jesus’ baptism, just as he was coming up out of the water, the heavens were ripped open and he saw the Spirit of God descending upon him like a dove. A voice came to him saying, “You are my Son, the beloved with you I am well pleased.” We also heard God say those same words last week on the mountaintop in the story of the Transfiguration.

Jesus heard this voice the moment he was baptized, the moment he identified with us, with humanity. Likewise, through *our* own baptism, God also calls us Beloved; God is also pleased with us.

The baptism of Jesus was the moment in our faith history that Jesus began his ministry on earth. We, and all our ancestors were given a perfect model in which to live our lives, and it is in today's lesson Jesus gives us our first lessons on how to live.

Into the wilderness Jesus went. The wilderness or the desert, as it is sometimes translated holds significant theological meaning here, as it does throughout many biblical texts.

The wilderness is a place where a person goes to confront his or her weaknesses and struggles to comply with God's will. It is a barren, lonely place where there are no outside influences, no other human beings—no telephones, no TV's or computers, not any food—just you and your Creator.

For Jesus, the desert was a place to reflect, to question, and to understand the significance of God's statement at his baptism: "You are my Son, by beloved with you I am well pleased."

Jesus was in the desert for 40 days and forty nights before the tempter came to him. He fasted those 40 days, and as you can imagine—he was probably famished.

And this is how Lent begins: from filled to famish, in just two verses. From the banks of the Jordan, baptized and blessed, full to the brim with the Holy Spirit, to the middle of nowhere, so hungry and empty you can't even remember your own name. From "You are my son, my beloved with whom I am well pleased," to 'If you *are* the Son of God, command this stone to

become a loaf of bread.” **From *You are!* to *If you are***. And the distance between those two statements is a wilderness.

Jesus is beyond just plain hunger at this point, he is famished. He is utterly depleted, and all he has left is what he knows by heart—that and the promise given to him at his baptism that he is somebody; he is God’s Son, He is God’s beloved, no matter what. All Jesus has is who his is.

I would guess none of us have ever been as completely famished like Jesus was, none of us have probably ever fasted for 40 days-- but imagine you were that hungry. What is the first thing you might forget? We forget who we are! All we want is some food to fill our stomach. It’s times like that when the tempter recognizes these vulnerabilities.

If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread, said the tempter. Show me a miracle. If you are so beloved prove it to me. If you really are God’s son, show me, because I won’t believe it till you show me. You’d think the devil was from Missouri!

How many times have you heard that temptation? *If you are such a tough guy, prove it to me—how many beers can you down in 10 minutes? If you are the perfect girl, then get the body that matches. If you are the perfect mother, then prove it to me—don’t have any other needs apart from your family. If you are a real man, then don’t show any of your feelings.* The list could go on and on.

If you are who you say you are—then prove it!

And suddenly, those warm, soft, and comforting waters of our baptism, when we heard *you are beloved*, start to feel so far away. We don’t get to stay in those waters of the Jordan very long, do we? The path from our baptism always seems to lead us through the wilderness, where we are tempted to let

go of what we know by heart. *You are my beloved* get replaced with *If you are beloved, then prove it. Earn it, Show you deserve it.*

The temptations Jesus experienced in the wilderness are not only about his *baptismal* identity, but about his *post-baptismal* behavior as well. Furthermore, as I would guess you have surmised, the temptations are not just about *Jesus*, but about his followers and our own baptismal identity and behavior as well.

They beg the questions: do we truly believe our baptismal identity as children of God, beloved by God, and will we be faithful in living out this identity?

You see, to be God's Son, and for us to be called God's children, means that we are required to trust God and to have an authentic relationship with God that does *not* ask for miraculous exceptions to the limitations of an authentic human life, like turning stones into bread for food or throwing ourselves off tall buildings and expecting angels to save us.

I don't believe this passage in Luke was as much about Satan tempting Jesus to perform miracles, as it was about Jesus' willingness to trust God.

If you look at each of these miracles Satan was asking Jesus to perform, they were not evil things—they were for Jesus' benefit, in fact. Satan was offering food for the hungry, safety from a fall, and kingship over all the nations.

So what do all these temptations have to do with the complicated temptations we experience today in our lives? These are all temptations to treat God as less than God. They are temptations to mistrust.

In our lives, we go in and out of the desert, our wilderness, many times—not only during the season of Lent. I believe God leads us to those wilderness experiences for times of questioning and wonder.

Our wilderness places can be places where our spiritual strength and stamina of our souls are refined and strengthened. During these 40 days of Lent, we are called to trust God. We are called to take a journey. Our journey into the wilderness, like Jesus', are times of testing, times in which God prepares us for certain tasks.

The journey I am speaking of is not the usual life journey we think of: this path does not follow the route of a lower paying job to a higher paying position. It is not a journey from illness to health, or from misery to happiness.

The journey I am speaking about is the journey of our Christian faith from baptism to death. Just as Jesus' ministry on earth was from his baptism to his death, we are also called to make a journey—our faith journey in which we discover our true identity—as God's beloved children.

For many of us, this journey can be marked by fearful times of testing, unknowing, or uncertainty. However, we may be assured that our journey will always be tempered by grace. We may be assured that we along with the whole Christian church on earth are taking this journey together, and following the one who has already traveled the path for us, has already made his journey.

What a different world it might be if we saw that wilderness that lies between being filled and being famished as a place to remember who we are.

What a different Lent it might be, if we made no other promises to one another than to remember our baptisms and be thankful.

Amen.

