

From the Pulpit  
Salem First Presbyterian Church

## Wisdom from the Wilderness

Matthew 4: 1-11

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As we come to the first Sunday in Lent, the story is told of an Irishman who moved to the US, far from his family back home in Ireland. He found an Irish bar in the city, and went there one Friday after work and ordered three pints of Guinness. He lined them up on the bar and drank them each, one by one, over the course of the evening. The bartender asked, “why don’t you just order them one at a time so they’d be fresh?” He explained, “my two brothers back home in Ireland and I agreed that every Friday we would have three pints of Guinness each to toast each other, as though we were all sitting here together.” The barman nodded, and this went on, week after week, every Friday, three pints of Guinness.

One Friday, the Irishman came in, and ordered *two pints* of Guinness. The bartender served him and said, “I’m sorry about your brother,” assuming one of them must have died. “Oh no,” said the Irishman, “it’s not that; it’s just I’ve given up drinking for Lent.”

From that lighter side of Lent, we turn to a more sober story, Matthew’s account of Jesus’ testing in the wilderness. Lent goes back to the early church as a time of reflection, preparing the heart for Easter. The 40 days of Lent recalled Jesus’ 40 days of temptation in the wilderness, and the people of Israel’s 40 years of wandering in the wilderness after the exodus from Egypt. Their time in the wilderness was long and trying, but in the end it helped to build them into a cohesive community.

Sometimes there is a sense, perhaps we’ve had it here in the church in recent months, that a time in the wilderness, as painful as it may sometimes be, has helped to bind us together as God’s people, helping us learn to care for each other more deeply as a community of faith.

In the wilderness, Jesus faced a time of testing, through the rather enigmatic figure of the devil. As contemporary people, we’re not quite sure what to do with the devil. Some would read the story as a psychological parable about the inward temptations faced by all of us as we seek to balance our personal lives with a call to wider service of the common good.

In thinking of the role played by the devil in this story, we note he is seen as the “tempter” or “Satan,” a term used in the Old Testament as a description more than a name. It means something like the accuser. In the tradition Jesus inherited, it’s important to remember the devil was not seen as by any means an equal power competing with God, but more like the district attorney, the accuser, bringing to light our failings, or in Jesus’ case, tempting him to turn from his true path in service of all humanity.

The temptations were three: Jesus had fasted the whole forty days, and in one of the understatement of Scripture, we read, he was famished. The devil then quotes Scripture to his advantage, “turn these stones to bread.” But Jesus fends off the temptation, with a reminder that “man does not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God.” For our lives, this can serve as a reminder that even if we at some stage have everything we’ve ever wanted, we may find it is not enough; we can have the house and the car and the spouse and the job, and still feel there is something missing at the center of it all. Jesus reminds us that there is a deeper reality of the Spirit that alone can fill the emptiness. There are overtones here, for our culture, which struggles with eating disorders. There is a sense in which one cannot eat enough to fill the inner emptiness.

Jesus’ second temptation is to throw himself down, as the devil assures him that angels will come and bear him up. Jesus replies we are not to tempt the Lord our God. This calls to mind for me the little church my grandparents attended in North Dakota. The church was yoked with several other small congregations, and the pastor would lead services at all three churches on Sunday morning, speeding along the back roads between towns to get to the next church on time. We kidded him about the dangers of tempting providence, as he prayed for safe travels, yet exceeded the speed limit by a wide margin. Don’t tempt the Lord our God, don’t indulge in dangerous behaviour and then pray to God to bail us out, that’s the gist of this second temptation.

The third temptation is the devil showing Jesus all the kingdoms of the world that could be his if he deserts to the dark side. This temptation has echoes for all who seek positions of power and authority over others. You think of someone who’s made a new manager at work, and it goes to their head. It may well have application for the various presidential candidates, as they envision the possibility of becoming arguably the most powerful person in the world. They will need to be aware of the temptation of power to corrupt the heart and to turn one away from God.

So we recall this strange story at the start of Jesus’ ministry, when he grappled with temptation in the wilderness to refine his clarity of calling.

Wilderness has a special resonance in Oregon. Many of us have spent time in the wilderness, maybe down near Crater Lake, or on the logging roads through the mountains. People here know both the beauty and the danger of hiking into the back country, where a sudden storm or injury can turn a day’s outing into a life-threatening ordeal.

If we look back on our lives thus far, there have likely been other kinds of wilderness times for each of us as well, not always of our own choosing. People are driven into the wilderness by the loss of a loved one, when their path as the surviving spouse or family member suddenly diverges from the world around them. While others are going about their usual business, those in the aftermath of loss awake each day with an emptiness that weighs heavy on the heart.

For others, heartache over a troubled child drives them into the wilderness, feeling estranged from all the families around them who appear smiling and perfect. I remember a professor of psychology once saying that 95% of all families are dysfunctional; there’s a certain comfort in that. Yet the times when it is *our* family, or our child, it can leave us wandering in a wilderness of confusion and guilt, unsure of more we could have done.

For others, wilderness comes with an unexpected layoff from work, or a forced retirement, leaving the days strangely unstructured, finding their slippers still on their feet though the day is nearly gone. Or there is the sadness of finding the love in a relationship slowly eroding over the years, until it has worn thin and cold.

In such wilderness times, we find as Jesus did, that there are temptations, demons and angels. We can be tempted to despair, to say, “it’s just too hard; how can anyone cope with this?” We can be tempted to wash our hands of someone, or to close off our heart and say--”no one will ever hurt me again.”

But the good news is that even in wilderness times, we are upheld by grace. There are angels who come and wait on us. In the wilderness of grief, we may find an angel in a friend who has known grief, and is not afraid of tears. In the wilderness of pain, walking out in the woods may bring a peace beneath the pain. In the wilderness of addiction, one may find a supportive group of those who understand all too well the topography of that kind of wilderness.

And the good news is that the wilderness doesn’t last forever. Jesus’ temptation lasted 40 days; then the angels came and ministered to him. One of the challenges people face in the wilderness of depression, is that they can’t see through to an end to the pain. The good news is that the wilderness has an end, with the help of supportive people and friends, there will again be a day of rest and recovery. The angels will come, and wait on you.

Though we wouldn’t wish it on anyone, we may find ourselves better for having gone through the wilderness. We gain a clarity about what really matters. A brush with serious illness encourages us to mend fences with an estranged family member; a broken relationship teaches us to attend to those closest to us, a loss reminds us that we need to find time to tell our loved ones how much they mean to us.

During Lent, I hope you will take time to reflect a bit on your life, to read the Scriptures each day, or attend the Lenten study on Wednesday evenings. Take these days leading up to Easter to walk in the woods, or write in a journal, to reflect on some questions like these:

- what are the obstacles in your life that make it hard to hear and follow Christ more fully?
- looking back on the year past, what are the things you regret, for which you can ask Christ’s forgiveness and healing?
- what habits or practices might you look at altering, to clear the path toward a more deeply fulfilling life?

Lent is a time for brave struggle of spirit, turning the light of Christ’s love on the neglected corners of the heart, allowing his warmth and love to heal the places scarred over by life. Lent

can be challenging, but the promise of Christ is that “if sackcloth and ashes are at the start of it, something like Easter will be at the end.”<sup>1</sup>

Let us pray: Lord God, thank you for Lent, for the time to think over the direction our lives are taking day by day. Help us to turn away from anything that prevents us from seeing your grace, to let go of old fears, resentments, grudges. Lead us on through the wilderness into the joy of your eternal kingdom. In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Frederick Buechner, *Listening to your Life*, New York: Harper Collins, p. 56. Buechner likewise suggests an inventory of questions for reflection during Lent.