

“Starting In The Wilderness?”

Sermon by Rev. Glenn A. Brumbaugh

Lent 1, Year C,

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Luke 4:1-13 NRSV / Luke 8:4-15 NRSV

So this morning, we start our Lenten journey in the wilderness.

The wilderness seems to play a big role in many stories in the bible, doesn't it?

From the story of the Exodus of the Israelites from Egypt,

to the traveling stories of Abraham,

this concept of the wild, strange places of the world

playing a major role in the lives of the faithful is pretty consistent.

One could even argue in the very beginning

that Adam and Eve were cast out of the Garden into the wilderness.

But what do we think of when we hear the word wilderness?

Is it simply the wilder areas of the world outside of what we consider civilization?

Those areas that haven't had major settlement by people,

where the wild animals can be found,

where there aren't many roads and conveniences.

Places where we need to do a little planning before we go,

since there aren't always convenience stores and supermarkets nearby,

or cell signal and GPS covering every square inch.

Often we seek out this country because of its rugged, untouched beauty,

for the sense of the hand of the creator at work in nature in its most raw forms.

But that same beauty can also be scary and intimidating

if we find ourselves suddenly without the comfort and security

of those conveniences we've come to rely on.

If the car should stop working, if we don't have GPS

and are without a compass and map,

or don't even know how to use those,

if we don't have shelter, food, or water,

we suddenly gain an appreciation for what the wilderness

meant to our ancestors.

For them, it was certainly a more scary place,

a location fraught with the potential for suffering and harm,

a place one did not want to be stuck in for very long.

At the same time, though,

it was often a place one could go to find true solitude,

a place where there were no distractions,

where fasting was certainly an easy practice.

It's here that we find Jesus in our gospel lesson this morning.

Jesus has been baptized and recognized by the Almighty

as God's son in whom God is well-pleased.

Jesus has been named and illustrated by this divine gesture as the Messiah.

Now he is led into the wilderness by the Spirit to fast and discover

what being God's messiah really means.

Often when we think of fasting,

it's in the context of denying or punishing ourselves.

So often we hear people say, "they're giving this or that up for lent"

and we think of that as denying ourselves something to observe lent.
But that's not really what the traditional meaning of fasting has been.

Certainly it is to go without food for a period of time,
but not from the mindset to deny oneself,
but to seek a meditative state
with which to better focus one's spirituality
and sense of connectedness to the Divine.

When one goes into the wilderness to fast,
one goes away from all the external distractions
that might otherwise keep us from focusing
on our prayer and relationship with God.

Part of those distractions can also include the need to cook and eat.

When you go for a period of time without eating,
it's actually been demonstrated that your mental acuity increases.

You become more focused and less distracted.

Modern medicine has actually discovered
that chemical changes do occur in your body
that devote more energy to your brain when you fast.

So going and out to fast had benefits for contemplation and prayer focus.

So Jesus is led to fast in the wilderness by the Spirit

but as part of that 40 day retreat he also faces temptation.

The temptation to take the easy road, the one without blood, sweat, and tears.

To use his status and privilege to solve the ills and injustice
that swirl around him.

The simple reading of this passage would have us making his trials in the wilderness just about personal temptation, about resisting greed, the thirst for power, and his own immediate hunger.

However, the actual Greek word used here translates better as “testing” than “tempting.”

What Jesus is presented with by the Adversary

are not the same sort of “temptations” in the sense we might imagine, like an extra piece of cake we don't need, etc.

These are tests to see if even good things can lure Jesus away from the will of God, or lure believers into following a more comfortable messiah,

one who makes things easier for them by wielding divine power to solve all their problems

or better yet, one who works well within the powers of this world.

The devil's challenges to Jesus are not to do bad things.

The first, to turn stone into a loaf of bread, would satisfy his hunger after the long fast.

By implication, if he can do that,

he can also turn the abundant stones that cover Israel's landscape into ample food to feed the many hungry people in a land often wracked by famine.

The challenge is to be a new Moses for the people.

Jesus' reply draws on Moses himself by citing Deuteronomy 8:3.

Bread is good, but not sufficient to define Jesus' mission.

The second test is offered in the devil's unofficial capacity as “ruler of this world” who can manage the governance of the world's kingdoms.

For the price of “worshipping” or honoring that authority,
the devil will hand it all to Jesus.

Let's remember that most of the known world in Luke's day
was under the heavy-handed control of Rome
and its economic, administrative, and military empire.

Surely a “regime change” can only be for the world's good!

Yet again Jesus' answer is no. The price is too high,
even to acknowledge the self-evident power of the devil in the political arena.

Jesus' reply is again from Deuteronomy, 6:13, all authority belongs only to God.

Implicitly, even playing the world's political game for a good purpose
would be to risk serving something less than God.

Something worth thinking about in today's political climate,
with the “will of God” being thrown around so much
in relation to political success.

The tests concludes with the last one in Jerusalem on the pinnacle of the Temple,
the place where the presumably most righteous, the priests, carry out their work.

Psalms 91:11-12 promises God's protection to those who are righteous,
which the devil quotes to Jesus as he tempts him to test that promise.

However, the very choice of location was flawed from the beginning
if righteousness was a prerequisite.

Many of those professionally righteous folks below
were living out their role among Israel's elites
by working hand in glove with the Roman occupiers,
to the detriment of Israel's poor and suffering.

Surely reform is in order!

The devil urges Jesus to throw himself down

to be gloriously revealed through the responsive actions of angels

and then he can straighten the place out.

But again Jesus quotes Deuteronomy(6:16),

“Do not put the Lord your God to the test.”

In Luke's account of Jesus' earthly ministry,

the meaning of Jesus' baptism commission unfolds,

recalling the three tests he has undergone.

Though he refused to turn stones into bread, he does feed the hungry.

Though he refused political power,

the proclamation of the kin-dom of God's justice and peace

was the focus of his preaching and teaching.

Though he refused to jump from the pinnacle of the temple

to see if God would send angels to save him,

he willingly submits to a worldly execution on the cross on Good Friday,

confident that God's will for eternal life would result in an Easter Sunday.

As we begin our own journeys of Lent with Jesus,

remembering and celebrating this time of fasting and reflection with him,

we will be walking through this time together by examining his parables, those

stories he told with familiar characters and settings,

but with unusual twists that often are difficult to make sense of,

and stories we often go with the cliff notes version of,

that makes easy sense and move on.

This week we're presented with the Parable of the Sower.

In the Parable of the Sower, Jesus speaks of how a sower went out to sow

and some of the seeds fell on soil that didn't nourish it,

but others fell on good, fertile soil, and grew.

We often read this parable and assume we want to be the good soil

that holds fast and firm to the seed from God.

But keeping to our wilderness perspective,

what happens if we read the parable differently.

What if, like Jesus, we are being called to go into the wilderness,

where the soil is difficult for the seeds to take root.

So often we read this parable as a reflection and indictment of personal spirituality,

for example, how can I be more fertile soil for the gospel to grow in me,

or we think what times in my life was I like the rocky or the thorny ground.

Perhaps we need to shift our thinking from focusing on ourselves,

and instead look to the needs of the wilderness around us and be present there.

Instead of focusing on our own soil,

let us instead think of the soil we find around us in the wilderness with Jesus.

Anyone who's done much gardening, or has been a farmer

knows that some soil is better than others at growing certain crops.

Some soil needs more work, more fertilizing and treatment to be productive.

What care does the soil around us need?

As the church we've been so focused on our own garden

we've lost sight of the struggles of the seeds God's scattered around us.

Unfortunately this soil is getting played out, is losing it's nourishment.

We will be wandering together for the next six weeks,
to see where God needs us to help things grow.

With the theme of the wilderness, we know that things grow differently
in the desert and wild places than they do in farmlands.

If we pick up and try to plant what we know,
it may not grow.

Instead, we must pay attention to the wilderness,
even when it's wild and unfamiliar, listen to the stories there,
and find ways to help God's seeds to grow,
in ways we might never have imagined possible.

I hope you'll join in that journey and seek ways to find new life and new ministry