

Sermon
Community United Methodist Church of Coeur d'Alene
First Sunday in Lent
Sunday, February 26, 2023
10am

Text: Matthew 4:1-11 (NRSVUE)

[prayer]

The wilderness is where we begin.

We are now in the season of Lent: forty days of spiritual preparation and discipline before the Great Feast of Easter.

The word “lent” comes to us from an Old English word that means “to lengthen.” It refers to the gradual lengthening of days as winter turns to springtime. Despite our recent winter storms, I have been noticing tiny signs of new life that herald the coming spring: a little more daylight, small birds returning, fresher produce at the grocery store.

New life is the promise of Easter. But in the Bible new life only comes after a journey through the wilderness. Before we can get to Easter, we must journey through the wilderness of Lent.

[pause]

Wilderness narratives are an important part of our spirituality. The wilderness is a place of danger and privation, mystery and doubt, self-denial and repentance. Above all the wilderness is a place where the wild Spirit of God is guiding, challenging, and forming us as people of faith. Moses spent forty days on Mount Sinai being instructed in the Law. The Israelites wandered for forty years in the desert, led by a cloud of fire. Elijah went forty days without food journeying through the wilderness to meet God on Mount Horeb.

And now, at the beginning of our Lenten journey, we receive Matthew's story of Jesus' forty-day sojourn in the wilderness. This story is rich in layered meaning, and we are going to unpack a few of those layers.

This story recalls a much older story in the Bible, the oldest piece of Scripture we possess – the Book of Job. In this book God directs the devil to tempt his most faithful servant, Job. Job is a prosperous and devout man, but the devil contends that Job is only faithful to God because God has blessed him. So, God instructs the devil to test Job's faith by taking away everything good he possesses – his property, his children, his health (Job 1:6-12).

Job's story is a sermon series for another time, but I want to briefly highlight the story's portrayal of the devil, because it informs how we understand Jesus' wilderness match with Satan. In Hebrew, the devil is "the satan" (with a lowercase 's'), which translates to "the accuser." In the Hebrew Bible, the devil is a member of God's heavenly court and is subject to God's will. He is God's prosecuting attorney, moving throughout the earth, testing people suspected of offending God's law. It was not until the period between the Old and New Testaments that the devil came to personify evil and was given a proper name: Satan (with a capital 'S'), which is the name Jesus addresses him by.

This ancient understanding of the devil's role is a good place to start in interpreting our Gospel story. Because Jesus has not come to the wilderness by accident. The Holy Spirit has *sent* him there. Jesus has just been baptized – claimed as God's Son and anointed with God's Spirit. And then immediately that same Spirit leads Jesus into the wilderness to be tested by the devil (v. 1) – the accuser.

Jesus' temptation is part of God's plan. God has claimed Jesus as God's Son, anointed him as God's Messiah, and now God will ask Jesus to demonstrate he understands his identity. God will ask Jesus to prove he is the Messiah by demonstrating he understands *how to be* the Messiah.

[pause]

Some historical context: When Jesus enters the wilderness, Israel is living under the oppressive rule of the Roman Empire – just the latest in a long line of foreign

rulers. The Jewish desire for a Messiah is a desire for liberation. And a conventional liberator is someone with enough military and economic power to overthrow Caesar. The Messiah is supposed to be a warrior king, and this assumption is the basis of the devil's test.

What kind of Messiah will Jesus be?

Each of the devil's temptations focus on an aspect of the Messiah's power. First, he tempts Jesus with bread. "If you are the Son of God, feed yourself. Turn these stones into loaves of bread" (v. 3, paraphrased). Jesus has been fasting for forty days. The fasting has prepared him spiritually, but his body is famished. A single loaf of bread would suffice to satisfy his hunger. But the devil is tempting Jesus to do more than feed *himself*; there are enough stones in the desert to feed a nation of people. Jesus' people are starving under Roman rule. Won't he use his power to also feed his people?

The devil then takes Jesus to the top of the temple in Jerusalem. "Throw yourself off. Show the people that you command the legions of heaven" (v. 6, paraphrased). The devil is tempting Jesus to use his power to secure the safety of his own body. But he is also tempting Jesus to publicly reveal he is the Messiah. Won't he use his power to give his people hope?

Finally, the devil takes Jesus to a mythical mountain, so tall he can see the kingdoms of the world. "If you worship me, I will give you command over all the power on earth – the power to rule and the power to conquer" (v. 9, paraphrased). The devil is tempting Jesus with immense political power. Jesus can use this power for his own personal gain, but he can also use it to bring about God's reign on earth. Won't he use his power to free his people from Rome and lead them into the kingdom of God?

What is truly challenging about these temptations is that each of them is good! It is good to feed starving people. It is good to give oppressed people hope. It is good to offer freedom and the kingdom of God.

And yet, at each turn, Jesus refuses these goods. He refuses to play into the devil's paradigm of power. Because Jesus knows that God's plan of salvation is greater than exercising power to secure material comfort and political freedom. God wants to reconcile the whole world to Godself. And the Messiah will bring

that reconciliation about not through great displays of power, but as a suffering servant walking the humble way of the cross.

The real temptation Jesus faces is the temptation to deny the weakness of his humanity, to choose his power as the Son of God over his poverty as the Son of Man. Because it is his humanity, as much as his divinity, that saves us. This is the great mystery of our faith: That the Son of God was born like us as a human being, lived among as a human being, suffered alongside us as a human being, and then died for us as a human being. Jesus shared the weakness of our human condition, our human limitations, “so that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by the fear of death” (Heb 2:14-15).

Jesus defines his messiahship in the terms of the cross – a complete identification with what it means to be human. He is not a Messiah that delivers his people by exercising power, but a Messiah who delivers by walking with us in the wilderness of our sin and suffering. Instead of turning stones into bread, he shares meals with those who are marginalized and excluded. Instead of standing on the pinnacle of the temple and enlisting the help of angels, he overturns tables to protest the temple’s entanglement with greed. Instead of enthroning himself as emperor over all the earth, he speaks truth to power and is executed on a cross. To be the Son of God is to live and die as the Son of Man.

[pause]

In response to each of the devil’s temptations, Jesus quotes from the Book of Deuteronomy. Here is why that is important: In Deuteronomy Moses presents the divine law to the Israelites. The law is a gift from God intended to order and sustain life among the Israelites. For forty years Israel wandered in the wilderness, relying on God for food and water. This wilderness sojourn prepared them to receive the law by humbling them to God’s sustaining presence in their lives.

So, when he quotes Deuteronomy to the devil, Jesus is making it clear that the Messiah chooses reliance on God over self-reliance. The Messiah chooses to trust the will of God over his own will. Though he has been endowed with divine power, Jesus humbles himself and sets aside that power, choosing instead a

testimony of insufficiency apart from God. “One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God” (v. 4; cf. Deut 8:3).

Part of being human is acknowledging that we have limitations, that we are the creature and God is the Creator. Our gospel reading today was paired with the story of Adam and Eve’s temptation in the Garden of Eden. “Did God really say?” whispered the serpent (Gen 3:1). Like Jesus, Adam and Eve were tempted to mistrust God’s leadership, to take and use power in a way that denied their reliance on God’s goodness. But unlike Jesus, they yielded to that temptation and so has every human being since.

Each of us encounters wilderness spaces in our lives. Those wilderness spaces force us to confront and accept the limitations of our humanity. In our desperation to escape the wilderness, we may be tempted to rely on ourselves rather than wait upon the Spirit of God to lead us through. But to be a child of God is to have the same kind of trusting relationship with our Parent in Heaven as Jesus had. Jesus came to show us a better way of being human, and that way finds strength in acknowledging our weakness and relying on God to provide for, sustain, and deliver us.

This Lent, will our testimony be one of self-reliance, self-sufficiency, and rejection of God’s Spirit? Or will the wilderness grow in us a faith that trusts God to provide, sustain, and deliver? Jesus’ time in the wilderness teaches us that we do not begin by rejecting the weakness of our humanity. We begin by accepting it.

Amen.