

Sermon

“Full to the Brim — Even in the Desert”

A Sermon for Cary Presbyterian Church

Sunday, March 6, 2022

First Sunday in Lent

Prayer for Illumination —

Lord, you are no stranger to the struggles and temptations of wilderness wandering.

† **You know the pang of insatiate hunger and the attraction of bread.**

† **You are acquainted with the allure of promised power.**

† **You experienced the thrill of being spectacular.**

And yet, you know these do not lead us to life, and it abundantly.

Today as we consider the Word from Deuteronomy and and from the Gospel According to Luke, may we find ourselves in these narratives about God’s wandering people.

Inspire us, Lord, to receive a word from you. A word that will last. A word with the power to change us and lead us into lives full to the brim. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Luke 4:1 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.’”

Luke 4:5 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.’”*

Luke 4:9 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.

Deut. 26:1 When you have come into the land that the LORD your God is giving you as an inheritance to possess, and you possess it, and settle in it, 2 you shall take some of the first of all the fruit of the ground, which you harvest from the land that the LORD your God is giving you, and you shall put it in a basket and go to the place that the LORD your God will choose as a dwelling for his name. 3 You shall go to the priest who is in office at that time, and say to him, “Today I declare to the LORD your God that I have come into the land that the LORD swore to our ancestors to give us.” 4 When the priest takes the basket from your hand and sets it down before the altar of the LORD your God, 5 you shall make this response before the LORD your God: “A wandering Aramean was my ancestor; he went down into Egypt and lived there as an alien, few in number, and there he became a great nation, mighty and populous. 6 When the Egyptians treated us harshly and afflicted us, by imposing hard labor on us, 7 we cried to the LORD, the God of our ancestors; the LORD heard our voice and saw our affliction, our toil, and our oppression. 8 The LORD brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with a terrifying display of power, and with signs and

wonders; 9 and he brought us into this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey. 10 So now I bring the first of the fruit of the ground that you, O LORD, have given me.” You shall set it down before the LORD your God and bow down before the LORD your God. 11 Then you, together with the Levites and the aliens who reside among you, shall celebrate with all the bounty that the LORD your God has given to you and to your house.

- I. I no longer do it, but in the early years of ministry...**
 - A. I went to a local coffee shop to work on sermons**
 - B. No one knew me, though the staff began to anticipate my order of a “Triple shot Latte and cinnamon bagel.”**
 - C. I’d hide in the corner at a little table barely large enough for my coffee and laptop to share and pray and type.**
 - D. Except that I would sometimes be interrupted.**
 - 1. Someone sitting down at a table near me would ask, “What are you working on?”**
 - 2. I replied, thinking it would end the conversation, “I’m a pastor — I’m writing a sermon for Ash Wednesday. It’s the beginning of Lent.” Then I returned to my typing in the hope the conversation was over...**
 - 3. After a long pause, my new found friend said, “I go to church . . . I am a lay-leader there . . . but we do not do Lent. The pastor says we are “Easter-people.””**
 - E. I grew up in a church like that — where “*every Sunday is Easter.*”**

1. I think I understand the sentiment of such declarations.
2. But I believe that they are misguided - though well-intentioned.

II. Why should we “do Lent.”?

- A. Why endure the pain of Lent when we could simple get together and be filled each Lord’s Day with Easter joy?
- B. Why come be reminded of our:
 1. sinfulness
 2. Weakness
 3. Brokenness
 4. Mortality
- C. Why not gather and tell stories of
 1. butterflies
 2. Sunrises
 3. answered prayers
 4. And, after singing some inspirational hymns, go home?
- D. Why journey through this bewildering desert?
- E. The short answer is because Jesus spent 40 days in the desert and because the first “declaration of faith” in the bible (which we read a few minutes ago in Deuteronomy 26) begins, “A Wandering Aramean was my ancestor . . .”
- F. The people of God have *always* been the sort of people who wander for the love of God and that

wandering often takes us away from the familiar and out into the desert.

- G. We *also* “do Lent” because it is the honest thing to do. Our life-journeys always include:
1. more than a few seasons of desert wilderness
 2. times when those we love grow sick and die
 3. when we endure loneliness and anxiety
 4. when we utter words that are cruel, flippant, wounding, or untrue and immediately wish we could take them back
 5. when we make decisions which we know immediately are poor choices and which leave us with regret.
- H. We “do Lent” because we know that being honest about these things is good for us and even the troubles of the desert can yield blessings with the help of God.

III. Every year, we start the first Sunday in Lent with the story of Jesus in the wilderness.

- A. He has *just* been baptized.
- B. He has *just* heard “you are my beloved with whom I am well-pleased.”
- C. Immediately he is “*led by the Spirit* into the wilderness where, for forty days, he was tempted by the devil.”
- D. How odd it seems to us that the “beloved”
1. would be claimed by God and
 2. praised as one who made God “well-pleased,”
 3. AND be led to the wilderness ==> devil!

IV. The God of the bible is a God in the wilderness.

A. And though “wilderness” is recognized for the peril it embodies . . . in biblical faith

1. It is *also* the place of *Holy Encounter*.

B. Wilderness may put a strain on us . . . but it is also the place where (over and over again) the people of God learn and re-learn who they really are and who God really is.

1. A couple of weeks back I encouraged you to read Deuteronomy 8. If you did that these verses will be familiar to you:

Deut. 8:11 Take care that you do not forget the LORD your God, by failing to keep his commandments, his ordinances, and his statutes, which I am commanding you today. 12 When you have eaten your fill and have built fine houses and live in them, 13 and when your herds and flocks have multiplied, and your silver and gold is multiplied, and all that you have is multiplied, 14 then do not exalt yourself, forgetting the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery, 15 who led you through the great and terrible wilderness, an arid wasteland with poisonous snakes and scorpions. He made water flow for you from flint rock, 16 and fed you in the wilderness with manna that your ancestors did not know, to humble you and to test you, and in the end to do you good.

C. The emptiness of the desert invites us to *search* for God

D. The stinginess requires that we *depend* on God

E. The deafening silence invites us to *listen* for God

D. The solitude of the wilderness demands that we must finally deal with ourselves and with God without the distractions of others.

V. When we read that Jesus goes into the desert for 40

days — we are reminded of the journey of Moses with the people of God who for 40 years trekked through desert to the Promised Land.

- A. Jesus cites Moses, remembering three teachings from Deuteronomy:**
 - 1. “One does not live by bread alone” (8:3);**
 - 2. “Do not put the LORD your God to the test” (6:16); and**
 - 3. “The LORD your God you shall fear; him you shall serve” (6:13).**
- B. Thus the life and ministry of Jesus are formed in the matrix of Wilderness and of continuity with the long-struggle of God’s people while in the wilderness to resist selling out and choosing a new/different/other God.**

VI. And *that* is at the heart of our temptations - choosing to be someone we are not.

- A. And who are we?**
- B. We are the creatures God chooses to love!**
 - 1. Think of Colossians 3:12**
“As God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved”
- C. All the temptations are a restless effort to pretend that we do not need God’s love**
 - 1. They are a rejection of God’s freely given love in preference for some form of self-defined *merit*.**
 - a. Productivity - turn stones to bread**
 - b. Spectacularity - Leap from the tower**
 - c. Power - all these nations I will give you**

VII. This Lent we are aiming to journey to lives which are “full to the brim” with all that God desires for us.

A. We begin by embracing the reality of the desert

B. Seeing in the desert a place where we can come to a new and powerful clarity about ourselves — even as Jesus did.

Belden Lane after caring for his dying mother:

“Only at the periphery of our lives, where we and our understanding of God alike are undone, can we understand bewilderment as occasioning another way of knowing.”

C. So, friends, let us not be like my coffee-shop companion of many years ago. Let’s “do Lent” trusting that God will journey with us through these days of desert wandering,

D. and that there are blessings awaiting us if we will commit to be

“steadfast and loyal, joyful and true, on the journey with” God. (taken from the mission statement for *The Pilgrimage*)