

Going where we are led
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Up until this 4th chapter in the gospel of Luke, we read about Jesus' birth story with angels and shepherds and a couple of stories about his childhood and experiences around the temple.

Today's gospel passage comes just after the scene at the Jordan river, when Jesus was baptized, before the beginning of his public ministry. During that scene at the river, a voice comes from heaven saying, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." This dramatic scene with a word of acclamation from heaven itself, is other-worldly. I can only imagine all the people who had gathered to watch the spectacle of the strange character of John, to be baptized, they must have been more than a little curious about this Jesus who was the recipient of recognition from heaven, claiming him as God's son. The crowds must have been more than a little curious.

It is not surprising, then, that our reading begins with Jesus being led **away**, into the wilderness.

This passage is where we meet the grown-up Jesus.
This where we find out what Jesus is made of.

Today's passage tells us that Jesus was full of the Holy Spirit and **led** into the wilderness by the Spirit.

Led, not was guided by or pushed into; **accompanied** by.

Full of the spirit to a place away.

A place of wilderness.

Time to gather himself together,
to more fully understand what is ahead,

to learn what it is like to be both fully God and fully human.

During this time apart, we read Jesus was in the wilderness
that he was tempted for 40 days
He ate nothing during those days
And afterwards, he was hungry
(I'd say that last statement is a bit of an understatement, a bit of biblical humor.)

I don't know about you, but I can hardly stand skipping one meal, let alone more than a month of food.

There is more going on here.

We meet the person of the *devil* here.

I don't know about you, but I really struggle thinking about being tempted by the devil. How does that work? What does the devil look like? Is this a real person or a red creature with horns and a tail or what?

Okay perhaps going down the rabbit hole of who is the devil is not where we are to focus in this passage today.

Maybe it is the *temptations*. Maybe we are to look at how Jesus was tempted to learn from him and his responses.

Could be....

I found one interesting note in my study bible about the first temptation...to turn stones into bread: while Jesus **did not** satiate his own hunger by changing stones to bread, he **did feed** the multitudes with bread later multiple times. Jesus' power was not self-centered or for self-sufficiency, but to use for good and to give away.

If we look at the other temptations, they could be about power and prestige. And to each temptation, Jesus answers with a truth from the Bible, from Deuteronomy to be exact. Frankly, to the modern ear these three temptations might not sound so bad at all; I mean don't we lift up self-sufficiency as an American ideal? And maybe that is the point. Maybe these temptations are those slippery slopes that

do not sound like they are bad at all, but lead us towards ourselves and leave God out of the picture entirely.

Presbyterian pastor, Barbara Chaapel, wrote:

“Jesus’ temptations are part of a struggle about his calling, about what it means to be the Son of God — and what it does not mean. And for us, what it means to be called disciples of Jesus — and what it does not mean. The focus is not *whether* Jesus is God’s Son but *how* he lives out that call. And for us, as individuals or congregations, not whether we are called but how we live out our calling.”¹

And for some of us, that means ordination and installation this very morning to service as church officers within and on behalf of this congregation.

Living into our *calling* could certainly be the message for us today. But I have to tell you something about this season: I’m not a fan of Lent.

Lent.

Temptation.

Sacrifice.

Fasting.

Not a fan at all.

Lent is not my favorite season. I’ll admit it, I don’t like to sacrifice. I like comfort. Frankly, looking back at the last two years much of what we have endured has felt very Lenten. Sacrifices, pulling back, solitary time. It has been wilderness living, lonely, with no end in sight. Remember back to the selfishness we saw in toilet paper shortages? That very human desire to hoard, to look out for number one can be pretty ugly in the extreme and pretty sinful to boot.

¹ https://pres-outlook.org/2022/02/1st-sunday-of-lent-march-6-2022/?utm_source=Presbyterian+Outlook+Email+Updates&utm_campaign=41a38d97a6-EMAIL_CAMPAIGN_2021_10_18_01_23_COPY_01&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_b2a9be72d0-41a38d97a6-264969993&mc_cid=41a38d97a6&mc_eid=74bea82395

This third season of Lent-during-a-pandemic is rough, I'm not going to lie. It was 4 years ago during Lent that some of us read a book on spiritual disciplines that involved weekly fasting and other self-sacrifices and disciplines. While I loved those practices and my faith deepened each day, I just cannot bring myself to focus this year on more sacrifice.

Haven't we lived in the wilderness for a while now? A third Lent during a pandemic seems a bit excessive. Is that not enough? Oh, wait.

Didn't the Israelites spend 40 years in the wilderness? I can seriously see how they started to grumble. I doubt I would have made it.

Yet, perhaps it is *wilderness* is where we are called to spend some time.

Wilderness can bring up so many connotations of danger.

Wilderness living will look different for you than for me.

If you picture wilderness, is yours a desert? Does it look more like Badlands national park? Maybe it looks like a mountain range with no houses or roads in sight.

What does your wilderness look like?

Wilderness might be the time...that uncharted, unending time when everything changes in an instant:

- A phone call in the middle of the night
- A diagnosis
- The job that went away
- A war on the other side of the world
- A dark night of the soul
- A virus that flips the world upside down

But in contrast, it could be

- We say 'yes' to serve
- A letter of acceptance to a reach school on the other side of the country
- or even when a womb thought long-shuttered is found to be fully functional and filled with new life

Wilderness can be a frightening place.

Wilderness could be a solitary place. Revered Quincy Brown said, “The Hebrew word for wilderness is *midbar*, and it suggests to ‘speak a word’ or ‘listen,’ implying that God speaks to us in the wilderness. The Greek word for wilderness is *eremos*, which means ‘a solitary place.’ So, the wilderness is a solitary place where God sends people to listen to him. The wilderness is not a place to stay, but a place of testing, listening, learning, and refining.”²

But even though wilderness feels like a solitary place, we cannot give in to the temptation to believe we are all alone.

Jennifer Moland-Kolash said in Christian Century:

“Wilderness time can feel really long, whether it’s 40 days or 40 years or 40 minutes. Most of the time when we encounter the wilderness of the outdoors, we do so intentionally with adequate supplies, a plan, and an emergency contact if we don’t emerge after a given time. But when we are in the woods of anxiety or the deserts of despair, the temptation is to believe that we are alone. We’ve spent two years learning new, heightened meanings for words like *quarantine*, *pandemic*, and *pivot*. I know I’m not the only one desperately wanting to keep those around me safe, but there have been moments during these years when I think we have all felt alone and isolated with our thoughts.

Maybe the true comfort of this passage **isn’t** that Jesus can successfully stand firm against temptation while I help myself to the chocolate I swore I was giving up, but rather that we’re **not alone** in the wilderness. Not only do we have a community of faith, we have the promises of God. We, like Jesus, do not head into the wild without feeling the waters of baptism still dripping down our foreheads. Without hearing that we’re God’s beloved.

We do not embark on this journey to live and trust and have faith without the assurance that the Spirit leads us: we do not go alone. We remember

² <https://day1.org/weekly-broadcast/6213ad646615fbfdf7000006/quincy-brown-conflicting-narratives>

and acknowledge the wilderness of our journey—a wild place of questions and fears and doubts and temptations. This wilderness is part of our story but not the end. We have the voice that speaks in the wilderness, Christ shouting down the tempter and assuring us we are not alone. We have the promises that respond to our wilderness wanderings—the assurance of God’s grace, the gift of worship and living bread from Christ, the communion of saints and the forgiveness of sins, the celebration of all the good things God has given us.³

Wilderness might even be a new way of looking at things.

Richard Rohr described sending people to the woods on a retreat. He said that he asked, as he “learned from wilderness guide Bill Plotkin, to ask people to draw a symbolic line in the sand and to truly expect things on the other side to show themselves as special, invitational or even a kind of manifestation.”⁴

What if we are to look at this time of Lent as wilderness time? To draw a line and look for God?

What if all of this wilderness time is not really about us, but about God?

One of my favorite theologians says, whenever anything good happens, “Look at God.”

What if that is what we are being called to do this season? What if we decide to behold, to be available for awe and wonder, to be present to what is without the filter of our preferences or judging as important or not important?

What if we just behold and see what God is doing?

What if we embrace this Lent, this one-tenth or tithe of the year and embrace this wilderness with the Spirit as our guide and look for God’s grace and mercy all around us?

³ <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/living-word/march-6-lent-1c-luke-41-13>

⁴ <https://cac.org/we-are-called-to-behold-2021-08-16/>

Let's look at Lent with a different lens, full of life, looking for what God is doing.

What if we allow ourselves to be filled to the brim with God's lavish love, a love that spills over, reaching beyond us touching everything in its path?

How beautiful will that be?