



The Journey Begins

First Sunday of Lent / 26 February 2023
Matthew 4

From the pulpit of First Presbyterian Church, Champaign, IL
Matt Matthews

After Jesus was baptized, Matthew and Luke report that Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. Mark's gospel (1:12) reports it differently: the Spirit drove (or "thrust") Jesus into the wilderness.

Regardless how he got there, this trip was not a vacation. It was not a sabbatical. But it was a pause in his ordinary life. It marks a shift, a transition. Jesus enters into a place where the space between heaven and earth is what our Celtic brothers and sisters might call a "thin place." During Jesus' sojourn in the wilderness, he is made ready for his formal ministry which will begin immediately upon his return.

A spiritual journey often serves as a transition from one part of our lives to another. And that's what's happening here. Jesus is shifting from one season of his life to another. In just a few verses he'll be healing, teaching, traveling, making disciples, healing the whole wide world.

We see in Jesus' sojourn in the wilderness the pattern for our own journeys. It is during these spiritual journeys when God works on us, animates us, inspires us, and gets us ready for the next thing to which God is calling us.

We can look upon the season of Lent in this way. We are walking with Jesus to the cross. We are getting closer to God. We are paying attention to spiritual things. We might be profoundly changed by the time we get to Easter, though we can't yet imagine how.

At the end of Jesus' wilderness sojourn, after Jesus was tempted, the devil left him and "suddenly angels came and waited upon Jesus." That word "waiting" is a form of our word "deacon." God sent angels to be deacons for Jesus, to "take care of" Jesus, to wait upon him, to minister to him.

The story of Jesus' wilderness wandering reminds us that God is near us on all our journeys, and we are never beyond God's grasp of grace. Jesus' time in the wilderness gives us courage to step out into our own wilderness, knowing we never step far away from the one who walks very near.

* * *

I've just returned from a spiritual journey and I want to tell you about it. This congregation allowed me a brief sabbatical break. I was gone for a month. It's great to go away when you know you have a place called "home" to which to return. I'm glad to be home with you again.

I'm going to show you some pictures today because I want to invite you into a few of the high points of my recent journey. I did not go into the wilderness. I was not overtly tested by the devil. I felt you were near because I prayed for you and I know some of you prayed for me. And, though I traveled a lot, everywhere I went I found God's deacons taking care of me, angel-wing brushing overhead, God's grace upon grace filling, guiding, restoring, healing, enthusing, re-creating.

For those of you listening on the radio, you'll have to use your imagination

1. The slide on the screen is of Sunrise above Chicago. Being away gave me a chance to see things from different perspectives.



2. This is a picture of my son, Benjamin and his fiancée, Faith. I stayed near Times Square for eight nights, but shared a meal (or concert, or museum) nearly everyday. Being away gave me a chance to see people I don't usually see.



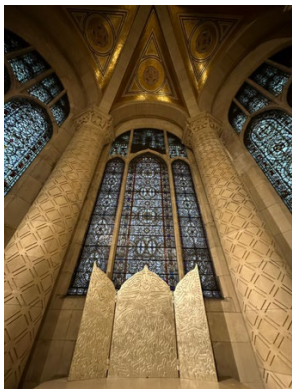
3. This is a picture of us eating. I spent about a million dollars on food. The table fellowship was priceless.



4. This is a picture of Ben, Faith, and Faith's brother William. Being away gave me a chance to let go of some things and to laugh more often and more deeply. God reshapes us with laughter.



5. This is a picture of the Cathedral of St. John the Divine. I wrote a novel while I was away; sabbath affords time to take on other kinds of holy work. This short novel takes place, in part, at the Chichester Cathedral in England, and here at St. John's.



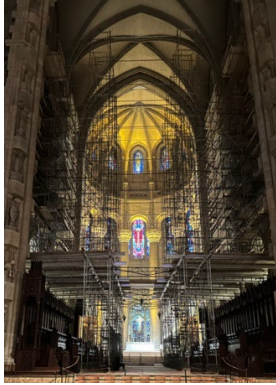
6. This is a picture of the long columns reaching up to stratospheric arches. A cathedral is like a sacrament in that it points beyond itself to God.



7. This is a picture of a bronze statue in the Cathedral. The woman depicted is naked from the waist up. Her eyes are serenely closed. Her arms rise before her face like twin towers, and into her forearms airplanes are crashing.



8. This is a closer picture of her face. Is this a look of resignation? Of pain? Of transcendence? I could not help but to gasp before this daring depiction of God. I could not help but to say, "Lord, have mercy." The paintings, stained glass, architecture, and statues at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine shocked me into seeing my faith with new eyes. And this is to say nothing of the evensong services I attended at which we melted beneath the glorious sounds of organ and choir.



9. This is a picture of scaffolding climbing up the walls of the nave which is being renovated. A church is always being recreated, whether that involves the bricks and mortar of the actual building, or the hearts of her people.



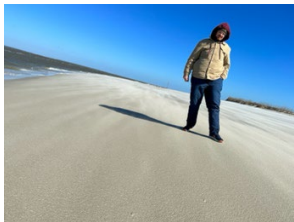
10. This is a picture of Randy Brecker blowing a trumpet at Birdland. He plays as beautifully as the host of heaven sing.



11. And this is a picture of the guitarist and band leader Mike Stern smiling from ear to ear while the band played on and on, and we rose higher and higher.



12. This is a picture of my seminary friend, Stephen Emick, at the Whitney Museum in the meatpacking district of New York City. We were enthralled by the Edward Hopper exhibit. This sabbatical break allowed me time to reconnect with friends who welcomed and shaped me at the seminary as we studied to be congregational pastors.



13. This is a picture of of my son, Joseph, at Tybee Island, Georgia.



14. This is a picture of the freezing cold beach. We hiked around both ends of the island looking for shells. We didn't find many shells, but we rediscovered each other. Alleluia.



15. This is a picture of the warm restaurant where we broke bread. Or pizza.
Blest be the tie that binds.



16, 17, 18, 19. These next four slides are seminary friends with whom I've meeting at least once each year to study, prayer, talk-shop, watch and discuss movies, hear family updates from, cook, eat, and hike. Lately, we've met in the mountains above Lake Lure, NC. These saints are: Mark Stanley in Hendersonville, NC; Field Russell in Banner Elk; Kevin Murphy of Cincinnati; Allen Huff of Jonesborough, Tennessee. This is one of those circles that will never be unbroken.



20. This is a picture of Lake Michigan from Donna and Scott Paul-Bonham's living room window. We met in Richmond at Seminary. They live in St. Joseph. Rachel and I rested in their home as they fed us, encouraged us, ministered unto us like those angels who surrounded Jesus in that wilderness.



21. Here's a picture of us in worship at First Presbyterian Church of Benton Harbor. On this good day, Donna was installed as an elder. The church is alive and well.



22 This is a picture of Mack-the-cat. During this sabbatical break I completed the first draft of a short novel. Mack and Ellie, our cats at home, wanted me to

use my fingers not for typing but for scratching them while they tried to nap on my writing desk. These interruptions were a means of grace.



23, 24, 25. These next three pictures are of Cousin Tom in New Mexico. He has been pretty sick, and when the family asked, “Who can go lay eyes on him?” I had no excuse not to go. I was on sabbatical. The break allowed me to play a role in the care of my family I am not always able to play. Thanks be to God!

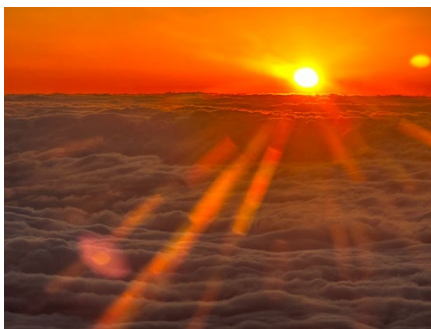


(Not all slides are printed here.)

26, 27, 28, 29, 30, 31, 32. The next seven slides are pictures of air travel: landings and taking off, flying above the clouds or below them. May your journey through Lent allow you to see the world anew. May you be open to being ministered to. May you be willing to care for others. May you be attentive to the whisper of God's Spirit.

To God be the glory.

AMEN.



Matthew 4:1-11

1Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil.2He fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished.3The tempter came and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread."4But he answered, "It is written,

'One does not live by bread alone,
but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.'"

5Then the devil took him to the holy city and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, 6saying to him, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down; for it is written,

'He will command his angels concerning you,'
and 'On their hands they will bear you up,
so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.'"

7Jesus said to him, "Again it is written, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'"

8Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor; 9and he said to him, "All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me." 10Jesus said to him, "Away with you, Satan! for it is written, 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.'" 11Then the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him.

Matthew 4:11/Mounce Reverse Interlinear New Testament

11 Thentote theho devildiabolos leftaphiēmi himautos, andkai beholdidou, angelsangelos c
ameproserchomai andkai began to takediakoneō care of himautos.

Yet even now, says the LORD,

return to me with all your heart,
with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning;
rend your hearts and not your clothing.

Return to the LORD, your God,
for he is gracious and merciful,
slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love. (Joel 2:12-13)