

Luke 4: 1-13 “Wilderness – Spiritual Boot Camp” Rev. Janet Chapman 3/9/25

Today is the first Sunday in Lent as we join Jesus in the wilderness where he spent 40 days wrestling with Satan’s temptations. For a few of us, our pilgrimage began on Ash Wednesday when ashes were placed on our hands or foreheads. Lent is a journey from that day until Easter Sunday, a journey in which each step we take matches one in the gospels, as Jesus journeys to Jerusalem where he will face his accusers and execution. Celebrated anthropologist Victor Turner said that when one is on a pilgrimage, the whole of geography takes on symbolic meaning. Lent is like a slow dance, in which each movement reflects a movement elsewhere, each step is matched by another in the parallel gospel world. For many years, us Protestants shied away from Lent, believing it to be too Roman Catholic. Such anti-Catholic sentiments, which carried over the generations, prevented us from seeing the beauty of a pilgrimage called Lent. We did what humans do when they don’t like one aspect or practice and metaphorically threw out the baby with the bath water. By doing so, we missed out on a spiritual discipline that both strengthens our faith and brings us closer to experiencing the power of resurrection and new life. Lent is not only a journey to the cross, it’s a path to the source of a mysterious, unending joy found in the empty tomb. From the dark ashes of death to the brilliant fire of new life, Lent invites us to enter the scripture readings and discover our own unfolding stories.

This path starts us off in the desert. In the crucible of heat and sand, Jesus was trying to figure out, as Frederick Buechner puts it, “what it meant to be Jesus.” The devil puts before Jesus three temptations: if you are hungry, change stones into bread; since you are the Son of God, leap from a tower and angels will rescue you; and finally bow down before me and all the kingdoms of the world will be yours. Although they sound archaic, they easily represent familiar things in our lives even now. They are about our relationship with God and trusting we are not alone in this world to face our troubles, fears, heartaches, and temptations. Through this wilderness story, Craig Watts points out that the hardest temptations to resist are not the blatant but the subtle ones. Blatant sin is easier to spot and easier to avoid. The sin that is hard to

resist is the sin that is for a good cause. Good causes have justified a multitude of evils. When Satan came to Jesus, he didn't try to get him to steal, kill, or lie. He simply tried to get Jesus to pursue his mission by using other means than God's means. Evil knows that it is easier to just attempt to out-think God, to ignore divine guidelines and instead, devise our own plans. We look for the short-cuts to get us out of the wilderness, and explain away our choices as being good for the cause rather than sticking to the discipline of God's methods.

The tempter said to Jesus, "Command these stones to become loaves of bread." Craig Watts tells the story about Nancy, a successful businesswoman. Nancy returned to her office from a meeting and her secretary greeted her with a message: Drake wants to see you in his office at 3 today. Drake was VP for sales. When the time came, Nancy walked down the hall to Drake's spacious office. "You wanted to see me?" she asked. "Yes, come on in and have a seat." From his smile, she knew the news was good. "Nancy, we have been extremely impressed with your work efforts and want to offer you the position of chief sales trainer for the Northwest region. Congratulations!" Nancy squirmed in her chair, took a deep breath and hesitantly spoke. "Drake, I am genuinely honored and pleased you have so much confidence in me, but I'm already away from my family more days a month than I prefer. Sometimes my son jokingly refers to me as that 'strange woman'. I don't want to be a stranger in my own home." "What exactly are you saying, Nancy? You know you are being offered a real opportunity here?" Nancy shifted in her seat uncomfortably, "I realize this is an important promotion with a sizable raise, but I will be away from my family twice as long. It's hard enough as it is for our family to go to church together anymore, let alone do anything else together." "Your family?" he responded. "Just think what you can do for them with the extra money; you want to provide the very best for them, don't you?" And Jesus answered, "It is written, 'One shall not live by bread alone.'"

Jesus knew the suffering of the hungry; he wanted more than anything to see the starving fed. Stones to bread appeared to be a simple solution, a quick fix for a very huge problem. Yet, in Gaza and Africa, well-meaning air-drops of food to starving

people became another weapon to be used by power mongers with assault rifles. Cartels and evil-mongers increased the suffering of those who see the bags of food just yards away, yet the hungry still have no access to relief. Sometimes, extra money, extra food is not the path upon which God leads to navigate the wilderness.

The tempter led Jesus up and showed him all the kingdoms of the world saying, "All this can be yours if you just worship me." Watts writes about a group of concerned Christians from all the over the city gathered in front of City Hall to hear the congressman speak. He was intense and the people nodded in agreement with an occasional "Amen" heard from the group. "We have to save our children from pornography, illegal drugs, and the breakdown of the family. It's time to get touch with stricter law enforcement, longer prison sentences, and more capital punishment. And prayer and Bible reading should be required in every classroom. It's time for church leaders and government to unite to make this country righteously Christian again." The group burst into applause. After he concluded, Mary approached him and thanked him for the speech but had some questions. "You talked a lot about getting tough on crime but nothing on getting tender with the needy. What about the homeless, the hungry, the persecuted and oppressed?" The Congressman stopped smiling. She went on, "I don't understand how churches can depend on the government to promote our faith; just who decides which faith will be promoted and how will you enforce righteousness? That isn't something you impose; it's something God inspires." "Look lady," he said. "Leaders like me are doing Christians a big favor. What the churches can't do by persuasion, we can do by legislation. What you can't do with a gentle word, we can do with the power to prosecute. You would be smart to team up with folks in high places." And Jesus said, "It is written, 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him'."

Jesus knew the power of alliances; would it be so bad to enter into a coalition with another super-power for the good it could bring? South Africa really liked the idea of trading with China, and still does. Yet, they found themselves very embarrassed when their alliance meant they had to refuse a visa to the Dalai Llama who had been

invited by the Buddhist community there. Quick fixes sometimes have counterproductive effects.

Then the devil took Jesus to Jerusalem and placed him on the temple's pinnacle and said, "Since you are the Son of God, throw yourself down and the angels will catch you." Watts tells of a mega-church which boasted hundreds of members but was now in decline. A church consulting firm was hired who told them they had to set themselves apart from the other churches, get noticed, and grab people's attention. A Texas church was offered as an example that started an annual Christian body builders contest where they promoted themselves as the hard-body church – the healthiest congregation in town. The Sunday before the contest, the minister preaches with his shirt off. One older man interrupted, "But didn't Jesus say the kingdom of God is like a mustard seed – it grows less conspicuously?" The speaker retorted, "Yeah, that was ages ago – things have changed. You must face up to the competition; whatever it takes. I propose you start a group called 'Bungee Jumpers for Jesus' and your motto could be 'We have a faith that bounces back.' Then you'll be a cutting-edge church!" Jesus answered, "It is said, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test'."

Jesus understood that humans love to be entertained. It is fueled by our love of fantasy and illusions that are a quick fix to the agony of reality we face daily. Cable and satellite TV are all the rage. Of course, the media can do a round of good to expose and educate. That is why every oppressive regime will demand total control of the media; only certain reporters will be given access in order to control the narrative. But fantasy and entertainment can have devastating effects. What is a teenager to glean watching kids online with the latest tech, clothing, and cars, when he is told he must have those things to be acceptable? How will any of us answer the question, "What does it mean to be me?" in light of what we see on the screens before us? Our Lenten journey invites us to see that quick fixes and subtle short-cuts are never the answer to spiritual growth, let alone coming to experience the lasting joy of the empty tomb. So let's take the long and upfront wilderness path together and be better for it.