

Sermon 10 March 2019
Deuteronomy 26:1-11; Romans 10:8b-13; Luke 4:1-13

I love this story—the sheer drama of it captures the imagination—and on the path of imagination we can find our way into the presence of God—the presence of God that clarifies, defines, and sustains us in truth and in, what Jesus calls, the kingdom of God and the abundant life.

We know this story, many of us have known it since we were children, and, through the years, we've heard sermons trace the narrative from beginning . . . to beginning. In Luke the story begins with Jesus, *full of the Spirit*, being led by the Spirit in the wilderness. The story ends with Jesus, *filled with the power of the Spirit*, returning home to begin to teach in the synagogue. And so it begins.

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The story is especially appropriate for the beginning of Lent. At the beginning of his journey, before he begins his public ministry, Jesus must go into the wilderness of radical self-denial. The 40 days are a time for Jesus to be stripped of any illusions about who he really is and what he was born to do. In the wilderness Jesus surrenders the pretense of being in control of his life. He faces himself in the wilderness, experiences the raw power of temptation, and learns what it means to trust God and the guiding wisdom of the Holy Spirit.

Like all of us, Jesus grew up in a neighborhood and culture that conspired to shape his identity. It happens to all of us, and for the most part it is a good and necessary thing. We need our families and our friends, our culture, and the incessant incoming messages about right and wrong, about character and identity. We learn who we are through the messages we hear and the experiences that pummel our days. We learn in the languid days of sunshine and gentle breezes and in the tumultuous days of wind and storm.

Some of the messages we learn are life giving; they glow in the warm light of security and in the scintillating light of adventure. Through the years we learn other messages. We learn messages that threaten and diminish us; they wound us, make us afraid, defensive,

sometimes angry. Out of the swirl of messages and experiences our personality emerges. We become who we *think* we are.

As the years pass—if we a lucky—we gain a degree of self-awareness. We realize that we sometimes wear masks of respectability. We know how to behave to get by and even succeed. Some of us wear masks of conventional respectability and some of us wear masks of modest rebellion. We want to be who we are—to stand out just enough to assure ourselves we are someone, even someone special, but we don't want to stand out enough to be exposed. To one degree or another we learn to dance in the space between a glimmer of who we think we *really* are, and the safer, more calculated image we show to the world outside.

We spend years building our personality—and we know that personality is a mix of truth and falsehood, cultural manufacture and essence. None of us escapes the process of growing up; no one of us grows up without including artificial elements to our personality. It is as natural as breathing—we each have a unique essence, and we build on that essence with truth and lies until we come up with the person we show to the world. It is as natural as breathing, its all okay—it is just the way it works.

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It was true for Jesus. He grew up in the swirl of cultural expectations that helped shape his personality. Maybe to a lesser degree than the rest of us, but it is true nonetheless—Jesus learned what it meant to be a Jew; he learned what it meant to be a carpenter's son; he learned what it meant to be Mary's son. He learned what his family, what the neighbors, and what the rabbi expected of him; how he was supposed to behave. Over the years Jesus grew more self-aware. He had a spark of recognition when he was 12 and talking about God with the elders in the Jerusalem temple. The moment of his baptism was a jolt of insight about who he was. Mark tells us that when Jesus emerged from the waters of his baptism, *a voice came from heaven* and declared, "*You are my Son, the beloved; with you I am well pleased.*" Perhaps Jesus suspected it was true for years, but could the baptism have been a

moment of crystalline affirmation? Could it be the day he felt the firm touch of his incarnation destiny?

Jesus hears the declaration, “*You are my Son,*” and immediately the Spirit leads him into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. Both Matthew and Mark give us the same three temptations, but in a different order. Instead of spending much time detailing the nature of the three temptations, let me suggest a bold brush of what they mean—what they meant for Jesus and what they mean for those of us who intend to follow him.

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As I said earlier, we spend years building an identity that is both true and deceptive—it is our personality. To one degree or another it was true of Jesus as well. The three temptations are meant cause us to trust in our ability to build and live a life on our own terms; to trust in our own abilities to satisfy the hunger of our hearts—to satisfy our physical appetites (for bread, pleasure, and happiness); to satisfy our need for security, to be in control of our future, to have safety and power over the unpredictable forces of nature and the world; to satisfy our need to be appreciated, admired, even loved—*all on our own*.

In short, we are tempted to believe in the foolish illusion that we are the makers of our own destiny and that we can manage our lives on our own. Sooner or later we learn we are not in control—but we keep on trying. The desperate moment of rally knowing we are not in control comes in the wilderness—the wilderness that suddenly swallows us up in tragedy or sorrow, *or* the wilderness we choose to embrace. Like Jesus we can willingly be led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. We can trust God to sustain us in the wilderness while the temptations reveal our false hopes and doomed expectations of invulnerability.

Thomas Merton writes about the *false self*—the self we have carefully constructed to survive. There comes a time in our journey that the old self has served its good purpose and it is time to go deeper into the self God created and is shaping for eternity. Jesus went into the wilderness to confirm his singular commitment to God. He faced three

temptations to turn from God and to trust in himself; three temptations he, in the strength of the Holy Spirit, resisted and overcame. After his illusions were dispelled and he affirmed his trust in God, Jesus was ready to return to Galilee and begin his work to save the world from sin and death.

Shively T. J. Smith writes that, *“This First Sunday in Lent is an invitation for Christians willingly to follow Jesus into the wilderness. Followers subject themselves to the kind of self-scrutiny and testing that unveils each person’s deepest hopes as well as the darkest and most self-serving outcomes of their greatest capacities, gifts and callings.”* In the wilderness we surrender even our most reliable resources, the tactics and strategies that have worked for us all our lives—we surrender them, refuse to use them as self-sufficient tools, and put our whole trust in God. It is the terrifying step of faith that alone puts us on the path to freedom and eternal life. We take that step in the wilderness, in the wilderness that blindsides us in the course of life, or the wilderness we willingly choose when we follow Jesus.

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I talk about following Jesus a lot—on Sunday mornings and in conversations throughout the weeks. Perhaps I should clarify what I mean by that. What does it mean to follow Jesus? I believe we *follow* Jesus in at least two ways. First, we follow him in the way we normally think about following any teacher or sage. We follow his teaching; we learn and seek to follow his values and walk in his way of wisdom, faith and compassion in the world. We choose to be his disciple.

There is, I think, a second way to follow Jesus. When we read his story, we see a pattern that can be a path for us to walk as we follow him. Read the great hymn in Philippians 2 to see the path he chooses:

[Christ Jesus] *emptied himself, taking the form of a slave,
being born in human likeness.
And being found in human form,
he humbled himself
and became obedient to the point of death—
even death on a cross.*

We too follow the path of humility.

Jesus walks the path of service, radical forgiveness; he walks the path of living that leads to death *and* resurrection. We too follow the path of the suffering servant, open-eyed to the sorrow and the glory of life around us and in us.

Jesus goes into the wilderness to refine who he is; we too go into the wilderness to have our personalities refined. The gold of our identity is separated from baser metals of self-interest in the fire of self-awareness, confession, and transformation. It is the work of our willing surrender to God's presence *and* the refining, purging, clarifying work of the Holy Spirit.

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We are invited to allow Lent to be our wilderness. Shively Smith says, "*Lent is the time Christians purposely give our faith permission to 'work on us.'*" (*Connections: A Lectionary Commentary for Preaching and Worship. Year C, Volume 2, page 37*). We don't discover our strength to resist evil in the wilderness—we discover our weakness and our vulnerability in the wilderness. In the wilderness we face our illusions in the revealing light of God's love. In the wilderness we begin to see the path of service and grace God has prepared for us, and we discover the unrelenting, steadfast strength of God's love for us!

We practice self-denial during Lent, it's true, but self-denial is not the thing! *Willingness to be enlightened* is the thing of Lent.

*"Search me, O God, and know my heart;
test me and know my thoughts.
See if there is any wicked way in me,
and lead me in the way everlasting.
(Psalm 139:23-24)*

Finally notice that the wilderness becomes a sanctuary for Jesus. For the rest of the gospel Jesus goes into the wilderness to pray. The

wilderness is transformed into his place of prayer. It is where he finds God; it is where he renews his strength.

I invite and encourage you to allow Lent to lead you to such a place. Let these few weeks transform the place we avoid, the place the world conspires to keep us from. Willingly go into the lonely, silent, seemingly barren place of solitude and prayer. Ask and allow the Holy Spirit to reveal you to yourself—to illumine the dark places, to unmask the false self, and to reveal the beauty of your essence in the light of God's total acceptance and love. These Lenten days let God transformed your wilderness into your place of revelation, rest, and rejuvenation for the living of all your days.