

Rev. Janet R. Doyle
Elmer Presbyterian Church
First Sunday in Lent
Sunday, March 9, 2025
Scripture: Luke 4: 1-13
Sermon: Jesus in the Wilderness

The wilderness that Jesus was driven into in today's gospel reading was not a very pleasant place. It was more of a barren place with very little water or vegetation. A harsh climate. Dangers everywhere. It was definitely not somewhere that most people wanted to go. Not for any length of time, at least. But Jesus went there and spent forty long days there. He went into the wilderness, after he was baptized by John, to fast, and to be tested by Satan. This was a time and place of testing, encounter, and renewal

What motivated Jesus to spend 40 days and nights of solitude, prayer, and fasting in the Judean wilderness?

For God's chosen people Israel and many of their leaders, the desert was a place of testing, encounter, and renewal. When the Israelites were freed from slavery in Egypt, they wandered 40 years in the wilderness. This was seen as a time of purification and preparation for entry into the promised land.

Moses went to the mountain of the Lord in the Sinai wilderness and stayed there for 40 days and nights in prayer and fasting (Exodus 24:18). Elijah, after he was fed with bread from heaven, journeyed through the wilderness without any food for 40 days to the mountain of God (1 Kings 19:8). Jesus was without any food in the wilderness for 40 days to prepare himself for the mission that the Father had sent him to accomplish.

Why did Jesus choose such a barren, lonely place for an intense and long period of prayer and fasting? Matthew, Mark, and Luke tell us in their gospel accounts that Jesus was led by the Holy Spirit into the wilderness. Mark states it most emphatically: "The Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness" (Mark 1:12).

What compelled Jesus to seek solitude, away from his family and friends, for such a long period of time? Was it simply to test himself and

prepare for his mission? Or was he also allowing himself to be tempted by Satan?

The word “tempt” in English usually means to entice someone to do what is wrong or forbidden. The scriptural word used here also means to “test” in the sense of “proving and purifying someone to see if they are ready for the task at hand”. We test airline pilots to make sure that they are fit to fly under all conditions, including times of adverse turbulence and poor visibility. Likewise God tests his servants to see if they are fit and ready to be used by him.

On many occasions God tested Abraham to prove his faith and to strengthen his hope in God’s promises. Abraham obeyed willingly even when God asked him to sacrifice his son Isaac, the son of promise.

When the Israelites were tested in Egypt for more than 400 years, they did not forget God. They kept God’s word and remembered his promise to bring them freedom from their enemies.

The wilderness was, and always had been, a special place for God’s people. The Scriptures are full of references to the wilderness as a place where important things happen. The wilderness is a place where God and human beings meet, and spiritual things happen. The wilderness is a place where things are seen from a new perspective, a place where people change, and a place from which change comes. It is the promise of something new and life-giving.

When the Israelites were suffering as slaves in Egypt, the core of Moses’ pleading with Pharaoh was that he allow the Israelites to make a three days’ journey into the wilderness, to worship and offer sacrifice (Exodus 3, 4). When they finally escaped through the Red Sea, it was for 40 years that they wandered in the wilderness. It was a time of testing, as they discovered who they really were in relation to God, but ultimately it led to their freedom and a time of prosperity. They were no longer the same: their time in the wilderness had changed them.

Generations later, the prophet Elijah, fleeing for his life from Jezebel, made a day’s journey into the wilderness where he sat under a solitary broom tree and prayed for his life to end. But a meeting there with the Angel of the Lord brought him food and new strength. He then journeyed 40 days and 40 nights, encountered God in the still small voice, and received a new commission. There was now no turning back: he anointed a new king and

Elisha as prophet in his place. In the wilderness, Elijah had met God, and had discovered new purpose and energy, from which change happened.

Isaiah 35 says,

'The wilderness and the solitary place shall be glad for them,
and the desert shall rejoice, and blossom as the rose.

It shall blossom abundantly and rejoice with joy and singing.

....for in the wilderness shall waters break out,
and streams in the desert.

....And the ransomed of the Lord shall return and come to Zion with
songs and everlasting joy upon their heads:

they shall obtain joy and gladness,

and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.'

Isaiah's vision of the wilderness is a place of new life and new possibilities and of resurrection.

In the New Testament, we encounter the wilderness early on – as part of the story of John the Baptist. Luke's Gospel tells us that John '...was in the wilderness until the day he appeared publicly to Israel.' (Luke 1:80)

For John, the wilderness was an essential part of his formation, and it was there that he learned who it was that God was calling him to become. And when he did appear to Israel, it was to proclaim and prepare for a new way – the way of the Lord. He baptized as a sign of people's choice to turn away from sin and self and to point their lives in a godward direction.

We come to this morning's Gospel, and to Jesus' own 40 days in the wilderness. Jesus was no exception to this pattern of testing. He went to the desert without food.

The story of Adam and Eve reminds us that they had everything they needed in the Garden of Paradise. But they ate the forbidden fruit out of disobedience because they trusted in themselves rather than in God. They were cast out of Paradise and driven into the wilderness. Jesus freely enters the wilderness in order to regain Paradise for those who lost it. Jesus refuses food to show his dependence on the Bread of Heaven, the Word of God, that would sustain him not only in his physical hunger, but in his hour of temptation as well.

When Satan tempts Jesus to turn "stones into bread", Jesus replies with the words of Scripture, "Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God" (quote from Deuteronomy 8:3; see also Matthew 4:4).

Jerome, the great bible scholar who lived near the Judean desert (347-420 AD), comments on this passage:

“The Lord responded in this way, for it was his purpose to overcome the devil with humility and not with power. ...the Savior’s very response indicates that it was as a man that he was tempted: “Not by bread alone shall man live, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.” So if anyone does not feed upon God’s Word, that one will not live.

Where did Jesus find the strength to survive the desert’s harsh conditions and the temptations of the evil one? He fed on God’s word and found strength in doing his Father’s will. Satan will surely tempt us, and he will try his best to get us to choose our will over God’s will. If he can’t make us renounce our faith or sin mortally, he will then try to get us to make choices that will lead us, little by little, away from what God wants for us.

Jesus was tempted like us, and he overcame sin not by his own human effort but by the grace and strength which his Father gave to him. He had to renounce his will for the will of his Father. He succeeded because he wanted to please his Father and he trusted that his Father would give him the strength to overcome the obstacles that stood in the way. Luke says that Jesus was “full of the Holy Spirit” (Luke 4:1). When tempted by the devil Jesus did not try to fight his adversary on his own human strength alone. He relied on the power which the Spirit gave him. Jesus came to overthrow the evil one who held us captive to sin and fear of death (Hebrews 2:14).

His obedience to his Father’s will and his willingness to embrace the cross reversed the curse of Adam’s disobedience. His victory over sin and death won for us not only pardon for our sins but adoption as sons and daughters of God.

How can we overcome sin and moral weakness in our personal lives? The Lord Jesus gives us his Holy Spirit to help us in our weakness and to be our guide and counselor in temptation and testing . The Lord gives grace to the humble who acknowledge their dependence on him, and he helps us to stand against the attacks of our enemy, Satan, who seeks to destroy us. The Lord Jesus is ever ready to pour out his Spirit upon us so that we can have the strength and courage we need to resist sin and to reject the lies and deceits of Satan. God wants us to “fight the good fight of the faith” (1 Timothy 6:12) with the power and strength which comes from the Holy Spirit. Do you rely on the Lord for your strength and help?

When we have Christ, when we have His Spirit indwelling and filling us, when we have His Word feeding and guiding us, then we have all that we need to face today's temptations.

We all know that wilderness experiences can often be scary, sometimes lonely, and even times when God can feel very distant from us. These wilderness experiences are challenging, and can even tempt us to turn from God, and find another way to deal with our pain. But they can also be times, when we approach them faithfully, that can deepen our faith. They can draw us closer to God and change us in ways that are good.

We all have wilderness experiences. It is worth wondering what we can learn from Jesus and his wilderness experience so we can approach our wilderness experiences faithfully and in a way that deepens our faith.

As we move into Lent this week, Jesus' time in the wilderness is over, and now he is entering a new phase of his life, his public ministry on this earth.

That can be true for us, too. We leave our wilderness experiences changed by them. Hopefully in positive ways. With our faith, our trust in God deepened. Our perspective on life changed and possibly our priorities re-arranged.

We are all invited to be intentional these next 40 days of Lent. Take time to step out of our ordinary routines and tend to our relationship with God. View this time as a wilderness experience, a time to deepen our faith, to trust in God, and to come out of it changed.