

C Lent 1 3.9.25

Psalm 91:1-2, 9-16; Luke 4:1-13

Focus Statement: Jesus is with us in the wilderness.

Every year, we start the season of Lent with the temptation of Jesus in the wilderness. I know why the lectionary committee chooses to start Lent here. Jesus was in the wilderness forty days and was tempted by the devil. We are at the beginning of the forty day season of Lent, where it is often the practice to give up something we might be tempted to have. The seeming symmetry of Gospel text and liturgical season proved too much for the lectionary committee to resist.

The problem with this correlation is I think it sets up some false expectations for us on what should be expected from a Lenten journey. Jesus fasted forty days in the wilderness. Forty days! Per the reliable source that is a Google search, experts believe that, with access to water, humans can survive up to two months without food, so this is, in theory, humanly possible. But still. Then, when Jesus was at his weakest and hungriest, the devil showed up to test him, and he remained faithful! I can't go a full day without doom-scrolling, and Jesus literally faced down the devil on an empty stomach. There's no way I can measure up!

Of course, I would counter, I've also never faced a temptation literally presented to me by the devil. Not a single time in my life has some creepy goat-like figure, dressed in red, with hooves, horns, and a pitchfork, come up to me and been like, hey, wouldn't you like to... Insert temptation here. I kind of feel like, even though I am not at my best when hungry, were that to happen, I would be able to be like, yeah, pretty sure I shouldn't do whatever you are recommending, creepy demon guy. Presented by the devil, it would be pretty

obvious what to say no to. The problem for me, for us as humans, is these things never are that obvious, are they. There's never a clear, "this is a bad idea, you should resist this" sign. Like the classic idiom says, "the road to hell is paved with good intentions." Most of us never set out intending to do wrong, but step by step we can find ourselves in a place we never would have imagined.

But, those concerns aside, I do think there is great value in starting Lent with the temptation story. Because the temptation story is, first and foremost, a wilderness story. And it's helpful to remember that even Jesus spent time in the wilderness.

Wilderness in scripture is an idea rich with meaning. Wilderness in scripture often represents times of hardship, testing, and spiritual growth. Times when God reveals Himself, and God's people are forced to reckon with our own limitations and God's provision for us. The Israelites wandered in the wilderness forty years, Elijah and Moses both encountered God in the wilderness, John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness. The wilderness is a place of both fear and growth, aloneness and dependence. A place of testing and a space for renewal and rebirth.

So Jesus was led by the Spirit in the wilderness... he ate nothing at all during those days, and when they were over, he was famished." And it was then, when he was at his hungriest, his weakest, his most vulnerable, the text tells us, that "The devil said to him," why don't you go ahead and turn this stone into a loaf of bread. Fair offer, right? Feeding people is Jesus' jam, after all. What's wrong with turning a stone into bread after forty days of nothing. To

which Jesus replied, "One does not live by bread alone." A commentary I read this week shared a story of a Jewish friend whose daughter was approaching her bat mitzvah, when she asked her father what was so wrong with pepperoni pizza. Pepperoni pizza having two issues for devout Jews. One, the mixing of milk and meat, and two, and most glaring, pepperoni is a pork product, and pork is forbidden. "That's a good question," her father replied, "why don't you find out the answer." And so, the daughter set out on her research, and came home from many a slumber party smelling of bacon. After a while, she came to her father to announce her conclusion. "There is nothing wrong with pork," she declared. "God made it, and it tastes delicious. There's nothing wrong with pork," she went on, "but there is a great deal that is good about learning to control yourself. When I smell pepperoni pizza, I will remember that I am a Jew, and I will control myself." The twelve-year-old in this story is wise beyond her years, because that is the whole point of fasting, of giving things up for Lent. It's not about suffering sufficiently so that God will appreciate your misery. It's about practicing the art of self-control, about remembering that there is more to life than our desires, more even than food, and to use those moments of temptation as opportunities of reflection.

So the devil goes on. Here are all the kingdoms of the world, worship me and they will all be yours. This one is tricky, because it plays on our thirst for power. And we can want power for good reasons. I think this one is especially tricky in the church. Imagine all the good we could do in the world, if people just followed what we have to say, if we were in control, if we had the authority. Wouldn't it be great, if this were a Christian nation, if we all lived by Christian values? Yes, except. Except, and here's the big except. What the devil

was actually offering Jesus was a slippery slope. Compromise. Compromise your values, compromise your ideals, compromise your identity, just a little, for power, and then you can flip back. But we don't flip back. Once down this path, we take more and more and more. And so Jesus retorted, "Worship the Lord your God, and serve only God." This doubling of names, the Lord your God, does something interesting in the Hebrew. The word translated as Lord is YHWH, which rabbis use to speak of the mercy attributes of God. The word translated as God, is elohim, used to speak of God's justice. By bringing these two names together, the "unification of the name" in fancy theologian speak, Jesus makes clear that the justice of God is lived out through acts of mercy, not power. Justice isn't holding down, it is lifting up. It can never be reached by the consolidation of power in any one human form, no matter how noble the ideals it represents.

And finally, possibly the weirdest one. If you are the Son of God, throw yourself off the side of the Temple, so that God can command the angels to catch you, just like it says God will do in the Psalm we read this morning. Here the devil shows a lack of understanding of both Jesus' mission and the psalm. Because Jesus' mission, Jesus' purpose, after all, was not to evade death, but to embrace it. To submit to it. To make himself entirely vulnerable to the point of death, and in doing so, defeat the powers of death so that all creation might have life. The devil was urging Jesus to be absolutely free from every constraint, even the laws of gravity. And what Jesus argued in response is that true freedom comes through God, and it is in fact in our dependence on God that we are made free.

Dear people of God, this text hits differently today because you and I are headed into wilderness times. Into, for the first time in ten years, separate wilderness times. You do not know who you will be, who will lead you, where you will go. I don't know who I will be, if this job is the right call—though I do feel called, what it even means to be a leader in the church in this particular moment in history. The world feels wild, our lives feel wild, the government feels wild, and as I was working on this sermon it was snowing again, despite all my hopes for March. In all of that wild uncertainty, this passage reminded me that God's people are no strangers to wilderness. To jump back to the Psalm again, the psalm before the one we read, psalm ninety, is a reflection on the fragility and brokenness of human life. To be human is to be in the wilderness.

And yet. And yet, as the psalmist of Psalm ninety-one reminds us, when we are in times of wilderness, we are are not alone, however alone we may feel. To be the people of God does not mean we do not experience wilderness. It means God goes with us into the wilderness. Jesus, the Gospel told us right off the bat, was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, so even Jesus did not face the wilderness alone. Psalm ninety-one ends, "They will call on me, and I will answer them." Not "if they call on me" but "they WILL call on me," and when they do, I will answer them. I will be with them in times of trouble. Not, they will not face trouble, but when they do, I will be with them. I will rescue them and honor them.

Dear people of God. There is wilderness. In our lives, in our hearts, in this world. There is wilderness. And in the wilderness there is, ever and always with us, also God. Leading us, guiding us, protecting us. Not sheltering us from every storm and challenge, but sheltering

us through every storm and challenge. With you, forever and always, is God. No matter what. Thanks be to God for the confidence of this promise. Amen.