

## Sermon for Feb.21, 2016 – “This is a Test...”

2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday of Lent, Year C – Text: Luke 4:1-13

Only two of the four gospels give the long version of Jesus’ temptation in the wilderness. John leaves it out altogether and Mark covers it in two sentences. Here it is: “...**the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. “He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him.”** That’s it. That’s all Mark knew, or that’s all he thought we needed to know, about what happened between Jesus and Satan in the wilderness. Anyone who remembers more than that is remembering Matthew or Luke, because those are the only two who go into any detail about what was said between Jesus and the devil. What this dialog proves among other things is that the devil, the adversary, is biblically literate. He knows exactly where to find the Bible verses he needs to test Jesus. But Jesus knows more than what the Bible says. Jesus knows how to **do** what the Bible says – which is how he passes his wilderness exam. Every time the devil offered him more; more bread, more power, more protection, Jesus turned him down. He says, no to the bread, No to the kingdoms, No to the angelic bodyguards. He’s filled up, he says, on worshipping God and serving only him. So by the end of the story, the devil still has all his bribes in his bag and Jesus is free to go.

Since you've already heard about a million sermons on what Jesus and the devil said to each other, I thought I'd skip that part today. Especially since neither of us is likely to be put to the exact same test. When it's our turn none of us is going to get the “Son of God test.” We're going to get the regular old “Adam and Eve test”, which means that the devil won't need much more than an all-you-can-eat buffet and a tax refund check to get our attention. What I want to focus on instead is where the test took place, the wilderness, and I want to do this because I suspect that every one of us has already been there. Maybe it just looked like a hospital waiting room, or the ICU, to you. Maybe it looked like your boss's office or the unemployment line when you lost your job. Maybe it looked like your kitchen when you got that piece of bad news. Maybe it looked like a church sanctuary as you sat during a funeral for someone for whom you cared deeply about. Mine looked like a car dealership showroom.

Wildernesses come in so many shapes and sizes and the only way you can really tell whether or not you're in one is to look around for what you normally count on to save your life and come up empty. No food. No earthly power. No special protection. Just a Bible-quoting devil and a whole lot of sand. Needless to say, this is **not** a situation many of us seek. Most of us, in fact, spend lots of time and money trying to stay out of it. But I don't know anyone who succeeds at that entirely or forever. Sooner or later, every one of us will get to take our own trip to the desert where we will take our own wilderness exam, to discover who we really are and what our lives are really about. I guess that could sound like bad news – but I don't think it is. It certainly doesn't have to be. I actually like to think it's **good** news because even if no one ever wants to go there, even if those of us who end up there want to get out as soon as possible. The wilderness remains one of the most reality-based, spirit-filled, life-changing places a person can be. Take Jesus, for instance, How did He end up there? The Spirit led Him. What was He full of? The Holy Spirit. What else did He live on? Nothing. How long was He there? Forty days. How did He feel at the end? He was famished. What did that long, famishing stretch in the wilderness do to Him? Short answer – it **freed** Him. It freed Him from all diabolical attempts to distract Him from His true purpose...from hungry craving for things with no power to give Him life...from any illusion He might've had that God would make choices for Him.

After forty days in the wilderness, Jesus had not only learned to manage His appetites, He'd also learned to trust the Spirit that had led him there to lead Him out again. He gained the kind of clarity and determination He couldn't have found anywhere else.

This wisdom about the value of the wilderness is just about lost, I think. Lost to popular American culture for sure. Probably even lost to the Christian tradition charged with preserving it. Those of us come to church with any kind of regularity, and who still bother to observe Lent, get a bit of it every year around this time. Even if all we do is give up chocolate, or fast food...but that kernel of the wisdom is still there – and it's this...That anyone who wants to follow Jesus all the way to the cross needs the kind of clarity and determination that can only be found the wilderness. From Ash Wednesday to Easter Sunday, we Christians are invited to do without a few things we're perfectly capable of having. We're also invited to take on some things that we're just as capable of avoiding. Such as taking a moral inventory or having a difficult conversation with someone they're mad at.

“Lent” comes from an old English word meaning “spring.” It's not just a reference to spring flowers pushing their ways out of the ground in the season before Easter, but also to the greening (if you will) of the human soul, pruned with repentance and fertilized with fasting, spritzed with self-appraisal and mulched with prayer. I was in my early twenty's before I realized that Lent wasn't about God punishing me for being human. And it took me another five years to figure out that it wasn't about giving up something, or eating only fish on Fridays. So I don't really blame anyone who's decided to give Lent a pass. But if we've spent a lot of time and/or money trying to grow your soul without seeing any new buds or sprouts, it might be time to admit to ourselves that we might be going about it the wrong way. It might be time to consider, then, that maybe spending a little time in the wilderness is worth a try. Maybe a few weeks of choosing to live on less, not more. A little time practicing subtraction instead addition. Not so much because our “regular” life is bad, but because you want to make sure that it's our **real** life. The life we **long** to be living, the life we should be living. The life that God is calling us to live, the one Jesus gave His own life for...Which can be hard to do when we're distracted and living on stuff that's really not that good for us, you know the stuff I'm talking about. The lies that others tell us, or that we tell ourselves. The steady diet of platitudes, self-doubt, self-pity, guilt, grief, regret, denial and so on. Then, of course, there's the stuff we use to insulate ourselves from all those things. Or at least keep them at bay for a while...

Here's a question. Remember the days when you seemed to be able to find the time to stop and gather your thoughts? Remember when it was something that we weren't afraid of actually doing? And to those of us with cellphones, remember when stopping at a red light gave us a minute just to sit and think? Or to listen to a bit of music on the radio? Those days are gone. Especially with our cell phones within arm's reach, begging us to reach out and touch someone. I heard that there are people who've give up using their cell phones and electronic devices (iPads and such) for Lent. Can you imagine? I know other people who've given up watching television or shopping. Of course, none of this would impress people who spend their lives trying to figure out where the next meal is coming from. But in a culture of plenty (like ours), I have a lot of respect for anyone who tries to make it without “anesthesia” for a while. You know what I mean by anesthesia, it's what I alluded to earlier. It's all the stuff, the appliances or habits or substances, that we use to insulate us from our junk...or keep it at bay. The stuff we use to keep themselves from feeling what it **really** feels like to live the kind of lives we're living.

I mean, almost everyone uses **something**, if not anesthesia, then at least a favorite pacifier...Facebook, Twitter, computer games, binge watching Game of Thrones, or Downton Abbey, Pottery Barn or L. L. Bean catalogs, or Ebay or Amazon.com, a 12 year old single-malt scotch, or a nice Cabernet. I'm not saying those are awful things, although they could be. I'm just saying they're distractions. They're things we reach for when we're too tired, too sad, or too afraid to enter the wilderness of the present moment, when we'd rather not allow our minds to wander and begin to wonder what it's really about.

A few weeks ago I asked what the might world look like if we took the time to be silent and just listened. What our **lives** would look like if we listened, not in preparation to **respond**, but in order to **understand**. I'm guessing that most of you probably thought a little more listening might not be such a bad thing, at least I hope you did! The problem for most of us is that we cannot go straight from setting down the cell phone, turning off the device, the TV or radio, or whatever, to hearing the still, small voice of God in the wilderness. If it worked like that, churches would be full and Verizon would be out of business. If it worked like that, Lent would only be about twenty minutes long. What we have instead are forty whole days for finding out what life is like without the usual painkillers and pacifiers, which is how most of us learn what led us to use them in the first place. Once you take the headphones off, the earbuds out, the silence can be really, really **loud**. Once you turn off the television, put down the book, turn off the device, well, the night can get really, really **long**. After a while you can start thinking that all of this quiet emptiness or, (worst case), all this howling wilderness is a sign of things gone really, truly, badly wrong.

What do I mean? I mean, the devil on the loose, running amok. I mean temptations everywhere and nowhere to turn. All our lifelines used up, and no help from the audience. I mean God himself seemingly gone AWOL. What I mean is our complete inability to deal with any of these things on our own and our desperate desire clinging to a fragile façade of independence. But if we can remember to breathe, if we can offer even the briefest, most perfunctory of prayers, I'm willing to bet that nine times out of ten you can make it through your first night with no extra bread, no power, no protection, and with little more than a deep desire for God. You can get used to the sound of your own heart beating, and whatever it is that's yipping out there, or scratching at the door. You may even be able to sleep a little while and wake up more glad to be alive than you can ever remember being.

Lent still has twenty five days to go, thirty five if you count weekends. So stop counting. Take it one day at a time. After you've reached for your pacifier a few times and remembered it's not there, not because someone stole it from you but because you made a conscious decision to give it up, then you may discover a whole new level of conversation with yourself. Are you hungry? ***I'm famished***. Well, what's wrong with that? Are you dying? ***No, not really***. Can you stand being hungry a while longer? ***Maybe. I guess so***. Okay, so what else? Are you afraid? ***Of course I am!*** What's wrong with being afraid? Will it kill you? ***It might. I don't like it***. That's not what I asked. Can you live through it? ***I doubt it, but I'll try***.

We've gotten pretty good at telling ourselves that losing our pacifiers is going to kill us. But that's rarely true. We may fuss for a bit, but we'll get over it and when we finally do, we're going to look around and see things a bit, hopefully more than a bit, differently. Which will more than likely turn out to be a good thing both for us **and** for everyone else in our lives. But, and here's the thing, it would be a mistake for me to try to describe **your** wilderness exam. Only you can do that because only you know which devils have your number, and what they'll use to get you to pick up and give in to their temptation!

All I know for sure is that a voluntary trip to the desert this Lent is a great way to practice getting rid of those devils, when they return at a more opportune time (and make no mistake, they will). Not only because it's where we lose your appetite for things that cannot save us, but also because it's where we learn to trust the Spirit that led us there in the first place to lead us out again, to protect us and to prepare us to worship the Lord our God and serve only him!

Thanks be to God.

Amen and amen.