

Readings: Genesis 2:15-17 & 3:1-7; Psalm 32; Romans 5:12-19; Matthew 4:1-11

Grace to you and peace, from God in Christ Jesus – the one tempted, the one revealed in the wilderness. Amen.

...and welcome to Lent. It's always a little jarring, isn't it? This first Sunday in Lent. Every year, we hear this story of the temptation of Jesus in the wilderness and every year, we wonder what to *do* with this story.

Sure, it's tempting to preach a sermon where the temptation of Jesus is one big moral lesson. *Jesus resisted temptation, surely you can too?* How's that for a kick-off into the first Sunday in Lent. No pressure, but consider yourself expected to live up to the model of the Son of God. In other words: *Buck up. Work harder. Quit your complaining.* That's the 'fitness instructor,' version of the sermon.

I don't know about you, but it feels like something's missing, something's lacking when it comes to the 'fitness instructor,' First Sunday in Lent sermon.

Then again, it's always tempting to preach about *wilderness experiences*. Jesus was in the wilderness for forty days. The season of Lent – starting with Ash Wednesday and ending with Holy Week – also happens to be forty days. *So, let's all take a journey in the wilderness. C'mon! It'll be fun, we'll feel bad for ourselves. We'll think about sin and death and the devil and what awful, rot-gut sinners we are. I promise, you'll just love it. Grab your backpack! Let's head-off to the wilderness of Lent together. ...if I weren't inviting you to the wilderness, I'd think I was a 'cruise ship director.'*

Of course, the trouble is... every year as we start Lent, people are always in such different places, aren't they? Sure, some people are ready to head off into the wilderness for a great spiritual challenge. Others, ready or not, have been thrust into the wilderness with a recent diagnosis or verdict, a loss or some kind of tear in the fabric of life... and a sermon about wandering the wilderness for forty days with the hopefulness of a 'cruise ship director' might just *hit the mark*.

But others might be just finishing up a wilderness journey – either literal or spiritual, psychological or physical. And still others might be nowhere near anything that resembles the wilderness.

So what we do about all that? Well, it's tempting, isn't it? To turn the temptation story of Jesus into a morality story to make us feel bad or better (they're really just different sides of the same coin, aren't they?) or to turn the temptation story of Jesus into a map that we can lay our lives on top of, but what happens when they don't match up?

In our Gospel reading, the devil seems to be constantly trying to misdirect Jesus – misdirecting his physical hunger, misdirecting his trust that God will protect him, misdirecting his allegiance, his worship. And it seems to me there's a sort of misdirection in taking either the 'cruise ship director' approach this First Sunday in Lent (*Let's all take a journey in the wilderness!*) as well as the *Buck up, work harder, quit your complaining* 'fitness instructor' approach.

So. What if this story isn't about you or me, but about who Jesus is? What if launching into Lent is simply about re-centering, re-focusing getting past all the mis-directions until you're left with just the one who experiences hunger in the wilderness – this one who is revealed through temptations and suffering to be so much more than you and me.

So, let's start with this Jesus and *why* he's here in the wilderness. The first sentence in our Gospel for today says, "*Then* Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil." So, here's your little Bible quiz for the morning – what just happened? What happened right before the first line?

It's rare for all of the Gospels to tell the story of Jesus in the same way, let alone in the same order (so when they do, it's hard not to take notice). And in this case, all three places where the temptation of Jesus is told in the Bible, the action right before it, is this – *A voice from heaven says*, "This is my Son," or "You are my Son, the Beloved...with whom I am well pleased."¹

So let's be clear from the start, Jesus is not being sent to the wilderness as *punishment* for something he did wrong. Neither God the Father, nor God the Holy Spirit says anything close to, "Well, you didn't eat your vegetables Jesus, so now you'll have to spend forty days without food being tempted and tested by the devil in the wilderness!" That's not the kind of cosmic God-parent we worship, is it?

¹ Luke is a slight exception to this with the genealogy of Jesus (Luke 3:23-38) being sandwiched between these two episodes. Without diminishing the importance of the genealogy of Jesus, in terms of the action of the story, the chronology is the same: baptism leads to wilderness temptation.

Jesus has just been baptized and the voice of God has declared Jesus “loved.” And as soon as we start talking about baptism, we Lutherans can’t help ourselves, we immediately add a fancy word in the mix – “vocation.”

“Vocation” basically means who and what God has created and called you to be. And for us, everything goes back to the waters of baptism and the voice that declares, that calls us “loved.” This is the place where vocation begins.

And if this is the place where vocation begins for Jesus too, well, it seems that the vocation of Jesus is that he is called to go to wilderness places, not as a punishment, not as a ‘cruise ship director’ (to proclaim a light-hearted message of “*Pack your bags we’re going on a sin-and-death journey!*”), and not as a ‘fitness instructor’ (to proclaim a moral message of “*Buck up, work harder, quit your complaining*”); but as the one who reveals the devil and all its empty promises, all the empty mis-directions, all the empty threats, all the emptiness of sin, death and the devil.

Jesus goes to wilderness places, where let’s be honest, empty promises are enticing, and empty mis-directions don’t look so bad, and empty threats are really kind of scary; and into all this emptiness Jesus proclaims, “*Away with you! God is so much more than your emptiness. Away with you sin, death and the devil. In the name of God, away with you!*”

I know it’s not about you or me, but still it is tempting, isn’t it? To make the same assumption² when you have been led by the Spirit into a wilderness experience, to think you’re being punished. You don’t have to be living in a wilderness time (of grief, loss, misdirection, pain or suffering), to know what I’m talking about.

As soon as the wilderness experience begins, the question is almost always there. Whether or not you ask it aloud, it still keeps popping up like that Whac-a-Mole game. Just when you think you can smack it and put it away, it pops up again.

What did I do wrong? Are you punishing me God? I guess this is my cross to bear. I guess I’ll just try harder, buck up, quit my complaining. And it’s too late. You’ve already lost the game. You let sin, death and the devil define your life as one big *sin-consequence-and-suffering* game.

² Idea comes from Audrey West’s commentary of Matt 4:1-11 on WorkingPreacher.org for Feb. 10, ‘08.

You try hard. You work hard. But sooner or later, you mess up (that's what we do). You step out of line. You just let one of the balls drop. And God's there watching. God's ready to punch you in the gut while you're down. That's how the devil, that's how the evil one wants you to see God – as a cosmic version of *Fight Club*.

And the first rule of *Fight Club* is: *you don't talk about fight club*.

But Jesus says, "I don't care much for rules when they're not working, let's talk about this. I'm tired of this way of seeing God. God doesn't send wilderness experiences your way as punishment in some cosmic *Fight Club* or *Whac-a-Mole* game, for that matter. Away with this! Away with sin, death and the devil defining your life. If anything, the wilderness is the place where God's love is most clearly revealed."

And that's what Lent is about. Turning our focus back to a God whose love is most clearly revealed through Jesus the Christ.

As you set off on this Lenten journey this First Sunday in Lent, be clear that temptation, testing, and wilderness experiences don't happen because you've lost your faith or lost your mind or lost your soul or just lost your way.

Wilderness living *reveals the way of Jesus*. When you've been baptized into a death like Jesus, you have been baptized into the way of wilderness living like his where lost will be found, where foolishness will be the surest way to wisdom, where brokenness will be the best way to healing, where weakness will most certainly be the way of strength, where blindness will be a guarantee for sight, where thirst will lead to water gushing up to eternal life, and where death will be the way to new life.

Or as Kathleen Norris said, "Life is easier to take than you'd think. All that is necessary is to accept the impossible, do without the indispensable, and bear the intolerable."

Hang in there. Grab your back-pack. God has called you "loved" and even now leads a way through temptation and the wilderness. Amen.