

# Sermon: The Necessity of the Wilderness

First Sunday of Lent: Genesis 2:15-17, 3:1-7; Matthew 4:1-11

## INTRODUCTION

We have an action-packed lectionary today. The familiar story of the temptation and sin of Adam and Eve in Genesis is no less relevant today than when it was first told, and Paul in Romans uses this story as a primary foundation for his doctrine of Christ's atonement for the sins of humankind. In Psalm 32, from where our call to worship originated, the psalmist sings of the joy and relief of forgiveness, which comes from acknowledgment and confession. Finally, driven into the wilderness by the Spirit and armed with only God's Word, Jesus confronts temptation at the end of his forty days and nights of fasting without yielding to it. Ultimately, the failure of the first Adam is redeemed by the grace of the Second Adam.

These texts fall on the First Sunday of Lent, a period of introspection and confession where we render ourselves vulnerable to the reality of who we are as human beings. To appropriate the new life that is beyond the power of death means we must die with Christ who was raised for us. To live for Christ, we must die with Him. New life requires a daily surrendering of the old life, letting go of the present order, so that we may embrace the new humanity. "I die every day!" asserts Paul (1 Corinthians 15:31). The way of the cross, the way to Easter, is through death of the "old self." In dying, we live.

This all sounds good but how do we actually do this? How do we die to self? How can we make this Lenten journey different than all the others we have lived through both individually and as a church community?

Let us look a little deeper into the texts:

## EXEGESIS

Our story begins back in Genesis and confronts us with the incongruity between our intended life with God and the life we choose.

God gives Adam a simple command:

<sup>16</sup>~~And the LORD God commanded the man,~~ “You may freely eat of every tree of the garden, <sup>17</sup>but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die.”

This was a simple command by which Adam could freely choose to demonstrate how he loved God more than his own desires. What comes next is the root of all our problems. The serpent begins to tempt the woman. Look at the strategy used here.

*Did God say...* or in some translations an extra English word is added to better convey the meaning: *Did God actually say...*

The serpent leads with a command that God did not give, and the woman counters with errors of her own. She distorts the tree of the knowledge of good and evil into *the tree in the center of the garden* – that’s rather like turn left at the house with a barking dog. She also adds a command that God did not give – *nor shall you touch it*. Since God gave the initial command to Adam before He had created Eve, we can assume a failure of Adam here to accurately communicate God’s Word – with tragic consequences. And of course, he did not exactly help in this scenario!

Think about that for a second – here at the very beginning we already have two faulty interpretations of God’s simple command. One is an example of omitting or distorting what God said and the other an example of adding something that God did not say. This is exactly what happened to the Law of Moses where the 613 commands of the Torah became distorted into over 10,000 rules in what was known as the Oral Torah, or the Tradition of the Elders, in Jesus’ time. The spirit of the Law became the letter of the Law. We know from Jesus’ ministry that He had no time for such human legalistic interpretations.

We see the same thing happening throughout the history of the church including today – just look at the number of different denominations resulting from matters of interpretation. Why does such license and legalism continue to happen? The answer is right here in the text -

<sup>6</sup>*So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food and that it was a delight to the eyes and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate, and she also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate.*

This is the key point: Our distorted view of the self always craves worldly delights, wealth, knowledge, power, and status. We construct our own meaning and purpose. We create our own counterfeit image and identity rather than live into the

image of God in which we were created. Look at the lengths we go to in order to sustain and justify our own self-image in the world. Is it any different in the church? Look at the lengths we are willing to go to in order to maintain the purity of our doctrines, to worship in the style that we want to worship in, to have Bible translations that meet our expectations, to do church in the way that we want to do church. This is why there are so many separate denominations professing unity in Christ. Much of this is a matter of our own pride, status, and image. In all of this we risk worshipping ourselves, our traditions, and our buildings rather than God.

Look at our world today – our secular culture takes worshipping of the self to new ends. Our gods are very much human, and we determine our own truth. Yet, despite all our achievements and associated pride, and self-worship, we are still nothing more than the pathetic image of Adam and Eve cowering in the garden, covering themselves with fig leaves in an attempt to hide from God.

The irony of course is that we were created in the image and likeness of God in the first place. Later in Genesis, we read how God sacrificed an animal to give Adam and Eve clothes to wear. Of course, this would only cover their skin. It would ultimately be Christ's sacrificial death that covers our sin and redeems our relationships with God, with each other, and with the rest of creation.

Our understanding of Genesis is still of fundamental importance today. We realize why we need Christ and why we need to die to self and live for Christ. We need to rid ourselves of our counterfeit self-image and live into our identity in Christ. Jesus calls us to follow Him and leave our nets behind rather than be prisoners of our counterfeit worldly identities. This is why the poor in spirit are blessed. This is why the meek, the humble, are blessed. This is the point of the Beatitudes. It is our self-constructed identities that may have served us well in the world that we must first deconstruct if we ever expect to experience abundant life on earth. This is what it means to die to self. The more successful we are in the world, the more we hold onto what we have constructed, the more difficult it is to let go. We cannot serve two masters; we cannot have two conflicting self-images.

Let us now turn to the Gospel text.

Against the backdrop of the Genesis text, we see how Jesus was tempted in the same way as Eve, although much more intensely. The enemy attempted to appeal to the counterfeit human nature, to the self-constructed image, to the worldly identity and even tried to reinforce his appeal by using Scripture out of context.

The first temptation was:

<sup>3</sup>~~The tempter came and said to him, “If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread.”~~ <sup>4</sup>~~But he answered, “It is written,~~

Jesus was tempted with abundance and plenty. Notice the plural - loaves of bread, not just one loaf. Jesus’ response was to counter with Scripture (Deuteronomy 8:3).  
*‘One does not live by bread alone,  
but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.’*”

Bread will keep you alive – but life comes from the Word of God. Just think, Jesus would later create enough bread in the wilderness to feed thousands of people and He would refer to Himself as the Bread of Life.

The second temptation was:

<sup>5</sup>*Then the devil took him to the holy city and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple,* <sup>6</sup>*saying to him, “If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down, ~~for it is written,~~*

~~‘He will command his angels concerning you,’  
—and ‘On their hands they will bear you up,  
so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.’~~”

The devil tempts Jesus with celebrity and fame. Anyone who could throw themselves off the pinnacle of the temple and land below unharmed would surely attract a following. In today’s vernacular, Jesus would have gone viral! The devil also cites Scripture (Psalm 91:11-12) but does so out of context by omitting a key phrase. This omission distorts the original meaning. Again, Jesus counters with Scripture (Deuteronomy 6:16): <sup>7</sup>*...Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’*

Notice in both temptations so far, the devil uses the words, “If you are the Son of God... We also read how these very same taunts were hurled at Jesus as He lay dying for us on the cross. “If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross” (27:40) This reinforces how the wilderness experience prepared Jesus for ministry.

The third temptation was:

<sup>8</sup>*Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their glory,* <sup>9</sup>*and he said to him, “All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me.”*

Finally, the devil tempts Jesus with worldly political power and status. Again, Jesus refutes with Scripture (Deuteronomy 6:13). <sup>10</sup> ~~Then Jesus said to him,~~ “Away with you, Satan! for it is written, ‘Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.’”

<sup>11</sup> *Then the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him.*

Jesus was tempted three times. The first time involved removing hardships and satisfying physical hunger. The second time was with fame and popularity. The third time was with wealth, power, and status. **Are we not tempted the same way every day in America?** It reminds me of what Jesus would say later, “*For what will it profit someone if they gain the whole world and forfeit their soul?*” 16:26

All three of these temptations would have separated His Human nature from communion with God. Jesus successfully stood up to the devil's temptations which were part of God's sovereign purpose in preparing Jesus for His ministry. Jesus would continue to be tempted in similar ways throughout the rest of His ministry, and as just noted, even while He was on the cross. Unlike the first Adam who failed God's simple test of love, who was more in love with his counterfeit self than with identity in which He was created, Christ the Second Adam did not fail. Jesus followed God's will, not His own.

## APPLICATION

So, what can we take away from these texts today and apply to our own lives during Lent? I believe one fundamentally important takeaway is, as my sermon title suggests: The necessity of the wilderness. This involves two components:

### 1. The Necessity of the Physical Wilderness

Here is the first verse of the Gospel text again:

*1 Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tested by the devil.*

Notice the role of the Holy Spirit and the location – the wilderness. There are other parallels within Scripture of the wilderness representing a place of preparation and a place of learning to trust God: Moses fasted on Mount Sinai for forty days and nights before receiving instructions from God (Exodus 24:18; 34:27-28; Deut 9:9). Elijah fasted for forty days and nights in the desert before receiving a new commission from God (1 Kings 19:8). Israelites wandered the wilderness for forty

years in preparation for their arrival in the Promised Land (see Exodus 16:35; Deuteronomy 2:7)

The original Greek word rendered as the wilderness is *erēmos*. This is the same word used to describe the place where John the Baptist appeared preparing the way for Jesus' ministry. This is the same word used to describe where Jesus was baptized and commissioned for His ministry. Where he was filled with the Holy Spirit. Our text this morning shows the Holy Spirit led Jesus into the wilderness to be prepared for His ministry. Jesus would continue to return to the wilderness throughout pivotal moments in His ministry. To name just a few:

Early in Mark's Gospel after healing many people at Simon's house in Capernaum the night before, Jesus gets up very early in the morning and goes off by Himself into the wilderness to pray. His disciples must go and look for Him. Jesus returns from the wilderness with clarity on the next steps of His ministry. It was in the wilderness after a night of prayer where Jesus chose His twelve Apostles. The transfiguration of Jesus on the mountain top. The wilderness was the place Jesus withdrew by himself after He learned of the death of John the Baptist. The miraculous feedings occurred in the wilderness and Jesus withdrew again by himself up the mountain. Jesus also taught His disciples to withdraw to the wilderness for rest and renewal.

The physical wilderness is thus a vital place in our journey as disciples. In the wilderness our worldly routines are disrupted, ordinary life is suspended. The familiar humanmade world disappears. In the wilderness, God gets our attention. The wilderness is a liminal space – an in-between place where our identity shifts, and new possibilities emerge.

You are very blessed because just up the mountain from this church is the Cheaha Wilderness Area, one of three federally designated Wilderness Areas in the state that eventually emerged from the Wilderness Act of 1964. This Act preserves the natural, undeveloped, and untrammled character of such areas which creates unsurpassed opportunities for solitude. These areas are about as close to the biblical definition of wilderness as you can find.

But you do not have to go to these extremes to have a wilderness encounter with God, to spend time amidst creation in contemplation and prayer. Where did Jesus spend His last night on earth? He went to the Garden of Gethsemane to pray – as close as you could get to the physical wilderness in Jerusalem. The wilderness is thus closer and more accessible than you might think.

## 2. The Necessity of the Metaphorical Wilderness

The Gospel text today has shaped the idea of a metaphorical wilderness experience that is usually a time when a believer experiences discomfort and trials. This can be represented by all manner of things and be a time of intensified temptation and doubt. The text today illustrates how such times are God-ordained and part of our continued preparation as disciples. In such times we learn to differentiate what really matters in life. Those things that no longer matter are part of our false image.

Such metaphorical wilderness experiences often come after our so-called mountain top experiences, periods of accomplishment or achievement named after the mountain top Transfiguration of Jesus. Why do such struggles in our faith journey come after mountain top experiences? When we are on the mountain tops, we are often in danger of becoming puffed up. We make fundamental attribution errors and assign our success to something that we have done. We lean more into our counterfeit self-image rather than our true self in Christ. It is the wilderness experiences that force us to reflect on who we really are; to renew our faith. When we lose our health or wealth, we are forced to rely on God and wait for God's timing. Such wilderness experiences help us to die to ourselves and embrace our authentic identity in Christ – which of course is freely given. We do not earn it.

It was Mother Julian of Norwich, a famous English mystic, who lived from 1342-1416 who said,

*“First the fall, and then the recovery from the fall, and both are the mercy of God.”*

Embrace your wilderness experiences as times of God's mercy. What do they teach you about yourself? What do they teach you about God?

### CONCLUSION

As I close, it is perhaps fitting to recognize the word Lent derives from the Old English word for Springtime. Let this season of Lent be a time of personal transformation where you encounter God in your wilderness experience, whether this wilderness is physical or metaphorical. Let this be a time to remove the ashes of what has been; a cutting away of the old dead self to make room for new spiritual growth as we follow Christ to the cross and ultimately to resurrection. Remember, the old self is small and always remains so. Like a single grain of wheat, it is only when it dies to itself can it bear much fruit. To live is Christ, to die is gain.