

## Message in Lent: Journey into Wilderness



### Journey Into Wilderness

#### Luke 4:1-13, Deuteronomy 26:1-11

Note: This sermon was preached at Christ Presbyterian Church in Terra Linda, where I served as interim pastor a number of years ago. What a pleasure to briefly return to the pulpit there!

#### ***Introduction***

It is good to be back with all of you. Some of you I know well from years back, and others I do not know well, and for others of you, I am a relative stranger. It's been about 8 ½ years since I was interim pastor here, and for a church, that's equivalent to being gone for a generation. Last time I was here, I could pick up Ian, Luke did not have muscles, and some of us had less gray hair or more hair in general. I was trying to explain to someone what it's like being an interim pastor, and finally I said, "It's a lot like being John the Baptist to Jesus, over and over again."

In preaching today, I am the guest preacher while Linda takes a well-deserved Sunday off. There's a cartoon that I found on Facebook this week, and it showed a couple of people sitting in a pew, one whispering to the other, "We've got a sub this Sunday, and we're going to sing the wrong hymn, pass it on." Fortunately for me, usually guest preachers are treated better than substitute teachers at school, so I expect everyone to stick to the bulletin.

Today is the first Sunday of Lent. Linda Lane-Bortell explained about lent for those of us who gathered on Ash Wednesday. If you count days from Ash Wednesday to Easter Sunday, it's actually 46 days, not 40. You see for Lent, you don't count the Sundays – because each one of them is a 1st day of creation, or mini-Easter.

Ah, I hear you asking then, how could this be the *first Sunday* of Lent, if, as I just said, we do not count the Sundays for Lent? Yep, I hear you, and I do not have an answer. It doesn't really make sense to me either, but that's what the church calendar says. Clearly this issue is above my pay grade.

This year, I was hearing from a number of colleagues, who, instead of trying to encourage their congregations into coming to an Ash Wednesday service, stood on the sidewalk with signs saying, "Ashes to Go." It's a drive-by version of an Ash Wednesday service. I confess to having conflicted feelings about the practice, but here's one thing that is in its favor. One priest was walking around asking if folks wanted ashes. One guy stopped, looked puzzled, and said, "What's that?" She said, "Ashes for Ash Wednesday. It's a sign of how broken and broken-hearted we are." He replied, "Give it to me then. I really need it."

If life has not been treating you well, or you feel as your heart has been broken, Lent is a time for you. If you feel like you are inbetween, or that you do not know where the next step in life will go, lent is a time for you. If you are out in the wilderness feeling alone and tempted, lent is a time for you.

Our story about Jesus' temptation today reminds us of our human condition. All of us have experienced temptation in one way or another, and here, Jesus' experience is one that we can identify with. This is most definitely a story about pre-Easter Jesus, the human being who breathes and bleeds just like us.

### ***The Wilderness***

We catch Jesus at the very beginning of his own discovery of who he is. We, the readers of Luke's gospel have already known who he is for quite some time having heard from the angel Gabriel the words to Mary, and heard told of his amazing birth, and shepherds seeing the heavenly host in the sky. The Jesus of Luke knows none of this. Only when Jesus encounters the Holy Spirit and the voice from heaven saying, "you are the beloved, my son." does Jesus appear to understand that something new and different is about to occur to him.

And directly after, he is led into the wilderness by a holy spirit.

Going into the wilderness is sometimes voluntary, but often against our will. Most of the time, like with Jesus, we are literally thrust into it by circumstances in life. The people of Israel who wandered for 40 years in the desert moaned about it almost the whole time, wishing they were back in Egypt as slaves. Elijah escapes into the wilderness when he finds that his prophetic words are putting his life in danger.

Wilderness times for us today hit in various ways. A child learns his or her parents are getting a divorce. A woman is diagnosed with cancer. A beloved spouse dies. A worker loses his job that provided for his family, and the whole family wonders how they will live, or whether they will need to move. A community finds out that a respected leader has molested people in his care. A person begins asking questions about what the meaning of life is after accomplishing the dream of a lifetime. A teenager finds herself ostracized by friends when she comes out.

The symbol of fierce landscapes such as the dry wilderness of Palestine (or US Southwest) is explored in a book by the Presbyterian pastor Belden Lane, who writes that "fierce landscapes are always preferred in achieving that "spiritual nakedness" which communion with God requires." (*The Solace of Fierce Landscapes: Exploring Desert and Mountain*)

*Spirituality*, Belden Lane, Oxford University Press, 1998.)

When we go “into the wilderness” we are left without distractions of the internet, or TV, or work or finishing the last task on the list; it is then that we find out that we are naked, and alone. We are focused on root issues, and issues of root identity. Jesus is trying to discover his own identity as a result of his baptism. In times of transition it is common to be figuring out anew two key questions “Who am I?” and “Who can I trust?”

But here’s the catch. Being in the wilderness means we are growing and that is when temptation comes.

### ***The Temptations***

Jesus finds himself in a similarly lonely position. Despite being called the “Son of God” in the baptism immediately preceding this passage, Jesus has no retinue of loyal followers at this point. John, who baptized him, continues on in his own ministry; Jesus enters alone. It is also strange at first reading to realize that even God is absent from this encounter, although he does have the company that other traditional wilderness leaders have had before him – the wild beasts and angels.

Belden Lane talks about the role of the wilderness is to remind us of God’s indifference.” A fierce landscape makes clear the magnitude of the creation and the creator. Now, don’t mishear this, it is not to say that God doesn’t care, but that at times in our lives God’s presence is hidden and can only be found when we give up all attempts at controlling what is to come and who God is. This pre-Easter Jesus ran up against this “Holy Indifference” just we do in the middle of our own wilderness journeys. The question for us today whether can we wait on the Holy One, being faithful when there are no clear signs?

It’s my belief that in his wilderness experience, Jesus learned more deeply how to trust God. Jesus reflected on the words of scripture that he had been taught, he also fasted and prayed and waited; these humble tools provided him with a way to respond to the tempter about the nature of the power of God in the world.

This is faith, the willingness to walk in the wilderness with the hiddenness of God, being vulnerable but mindful of our identities as children of God. Here’s an irony: when we give up our preconceptions of how God is “supposed” to act, we will find the Holy One. We are called to remember that we live in a covenant with God, a covenant that calls us to know more who God is, to know who we are. Then it will become clearer what we are to do, even in the wilderness.

### ***Transformation in the Wilderness***

I’d like to share a story about trusting in God. It comes from a 19th century dervish teacher Awad Afifi the Tunisian:

There was a high mountain in a distant land, and a gentle rain falling. At first the rain was hushed and quiet, trickling down granite slopes. Gradually it increased in strength, as rivulets of

water rolled over the rocks and down the gnarled, twisted trees.

The rain fell, without calculation, and soon it was pouring, and swift current of dark water flowed together into the beginnings of a stream. The brook made its way down the mountainside, through small stands of cypress trees and fields of lavender-tipped purslane, down cascading fall. It splashed easily over stones – learning that the stream interrupted by rocks is the one that sings most nobly. Finally, the stream made its way to the edge of the desert, and sand and rock stretched out beyond seeing.

Having crossed every other barrier in its way, the stream with its power fully expected to cross this as well. But as fast as its waves splashed into the desert, that fast did they disappear into the sand. Before long, the stream heard a voice whispering as if coming from the desert itself, saying, “The wind crosses the desert, so can the stream.”

“Yes,” cried out the stream, “but the wind can fly!”

“You’ll never get across that way,” the desert whispered. “You’ll have to let the wind carry you.” “But how?” shouted the stream. “You have to let the wind absorb you.” The stream could not accept this, however, not wanting to lose its identity or abandon its own individuality. After all, if it gave itself to the winds, could it ever be sure of becoming a stream again?

The desert replied that the stream could continue its flowing, perhaps even one day producing a swamp there at the desert’s edge. But it would never cross the desert so long as it remained a stream. “Why can’t I remain the same stream that I am?” the water cried. And the desert answered, ever so wisely, “You never can remain what you are. Either you become a swamp or you give yourself to the winds.”

The stream was silent for a long time, listening to the distant echoes of memory, knowing parts of itself having been held before in the arms of the wind. From that long-forgotten place, it gradually recalled how water conquers by yielding, flowing around obstacles, by evaporating and becoming clouds on the arms of the wind. The stream raised its vapors to the welcoming arms of the wind, and was borne upward, carried easily on great white clouds over the wide desert.

As it neared the distant mountains on the far side, the stream then began once again to fall as a light rain. At first it was hushed and quiet, trickling down granite slopes. Gradually it increased in strength, as rivulets rolled over water, with calculation, and soon it was pouring, as swift currents of dark water flowed together – yet again – into the headwaters of a new stream.

As we begin this season of lent, we are invited into the mystery of the wilderness to allow ourselves the quiet silence, and the vulnerability to become a part of God's transforming work, to risk the loss of an old identity to allow something new, something perhaps even magical to take hold of us.

### ***Invitation for Reflection***

This exercise is taken from a blog post by David Lose on [Trust and Temptation](#):

First, take a small card and write down those things about which you feel confident of God's support: maybe it's the love of your family, or a job, or your relationship with God. These things shouldn't be "givens" – stuff you never worry about, but rather things that matter, that you do worry about, and yet you trust God with them. Label this side of the card, "trust."

David writes:

I think it's important to start with something that is working because under the pressure of mistrust or temptation it's easy to forget what trust feels like and, indeed, that we are capable of trusting. But we are, all of us, so let's start there.

Then, on the other side of the card, write down one thing that is difficult to trust God with right now. Maybe it's a particular relationship, or a job or school decision, or something challenging at work or home, or an uncertain future. Label this side of the card, "mistrust."

Second, take a moment to compare these two things: why is it easier to trust God with one of them and not the other? What makes the challenging one different? Are they different, or might we be able to trust more than we thought. If you are feeling brave, you might invite people into conversation, so that we can learn from each other about what makes trusting God easier or harder.