

The Way in the Wilderness
A Sermon by the Rev. Scott Herr
First Presbyterian, New Canaan, March 6, 2022 (1st Lent)

Please Read:
Romans 10:8b-13
Luke 4:1-13

Albert Einstein is credited for saying, “If I were given 20 days to solve a problem, I would take the first 19 to define it.” Indeed, Lent is the 40-day period when we in the church focus on defining and trying to deal with the problem of sin. As I mentioned Ash Wednesday, my favorite definition of sin is simply, “*Not the way it’s supposed to be.*” Sin is “*vandalized shalom.*”¹ Just reflect a little more deeply on your own life or read the newspaper and you’ll get an idea of the brokenness and distortions of sin. Paul concludes ominously that “The wages of sin is death.” But the cause of sin is a little trickier. I like the explanation for sin as, *Looking to something or someone else besides God for your salvation.* Sin, in other words, is always a function of some kind of idolatry or false worship.²

What is most striking about our gospel lesson today which tells the story of Jesus’ temptations in the wilderness, is that Jesus, Luke writes, is *full of the Holy Spirit*. The Spirit leads Jesus into the wilderness where he is tempted by Satan, the Enemy. This is perplexing. Did the Spirit lead Jesus into the wilderness so that he could be tempted, or did the Enemy just take advantage of Jesus since he was already in a vulnerable place? I’m going to go out on a limb here and suggest that in fact it was the fullness of the Holy Spirit which meant that Jesus was ready to face sin head on... I think Luke is saying that whenever we are led by the Holy Spirit, sin is right there at the door. As we are more filled with the Spirit of God, we will become more aware of our identity in Christ and the challenge will be *how then shall we live?* How will we live in light of the gospel?

Today we reflect on the temptations of Jesus because we read that Jesus, though God, was tempted in every way as are we tempted... It’s helpful for us to know the big areas of where we will be tempted to sin, to fall short of the mark, to outright betray our calling. That’s the first important purpose of this season of Lent. But it is not so that we will wallow in our hopelessness and weakness. For I think none of us would want to compare ourselves and simply use Jesus as an example on how to deal with sin. No, God is the only one who can deal with sin... But we can learn the areas where we need to be careful, and also learn spiritual disciplines that will open us up to Easter New life. After all, the word “Lent” literally means “Spring,” a season of new life, growth and generativity... Whatever you make of this season of Lent, the goal is a greater love of God and a greater love of your neighbor, even your enemies. Self-giving love is the metric for spiritual growth and maturity.

So, the first issue that we see is that the Spirit leads Jesus into the wilderness. The wilderness is the place where we do not want to go. We’re talking about a place where we are vulnerable. Where we have no security in and of ourselves. No cozy home. No community. No resources. The

¹ Cornelius Plantinga, *Not the Way It’s Supposed to Be: A Breviary of Sin* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1995).

² Tim Keller, *The Insider and the Outcast* (Encounter with Jesus Series – electronic book published by Dutton, 2013), Loc 206 of 600.

wilderness is that place in life where you are stripped of all security, comfort and resources. It's where you are alone.

I'm fascinated to learn that in Hebrew, one of the words for wilderness is more literally translated as "the wordless place." While at times in our lives we might clamor for some peace and quiet, this wordless wilderness has a frightening landscape that whispers from the shadows, "Your life doesn't have meaning."

For some of us, we find ourselves in the wilderness when we are crushed by illness and become physically weak. For others we find ourselves in the wilderness when we are abandoned, through death or betrayal by a loved one, or through poor choices of our own. Whether or not we feel ourselves to be responsible for being in the wilderness, the point is that it is in the wilderness where God meets us.

The first test that Jesus faces in the wilderness is around his identity. The devil taunts him, "If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread." Jesus has just been baptized and it was clear to him God's affirmation, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased" (Luke 3:22). The first temptation to sin is *to forget who we really are*. Every person is created in the image of God. We have the *imago dei* and are therefore precious in the eyes of God, regardless of whether we are religious or non-religious, whether we are good or evil, whether we are intelligent or ignorant; rich or poor, beautiful or ugly.

Sin is forgetting that we are beloved children of God. That no matter how great a sinner we may be, we have a greater savior in Jesus because God loves us. From God's perspective, we have only to receive God's grace, the gift of salvation through faith. There's nothing we can do to change our status as beloved children of God. That's the mystery of the good news. In Jesus' life, death and resurrection, God has done for us what we could not do for ourselves. And more than anything else, we need to remember and recover our identity as beloved children of God. This is one of the primary goals for us in this season of Lent. New life begins as we remember who we really are in Christ...

But then, it's a matter of what this unique relationship to God really means. How then shall we live our lives? The devil tempts Jesus in three ways, I think there are three specific challenges that we all must face in the spiritual life. Diogenes Allen summarizes them as materialism, power, and security.³

I read an interesting article once by Sam Loewenberg in which he was critiquing a government process of evaluation aid organizations. Without getting into the details, an important principle that Loewenberg raises is that "you get things right by analyzing what went wrong." In other words, you have to be honest about your failures if you're going to have any hope of experiencing true success. And the reverse is quite true: He says that "pressure for positive results should not

³ Diogenes Allen, *Temptation* (Cowley,...

be an encouragement to skimp on the truth. Making a difference in the world is hard, often messy work. Pretending otherwise is no help at all.”⁴

So, here’s the problem with most religious projects: We focus on how we appear to others at the expense of how we really are before God! That’s why you have so many church leaders going down in flames, the most recent being at Hillsong and the news about the corruption at Ravi Zacharais International Ministries... There’s a huge chasm between private and public life.

My favorite motto for life is simply, “To be and not to seem...” Lent is a time for moving away from appearances and getting back to substance. It’s a time for spiritual Spring cleaning. It’s a time to recognize that we have problems. And in order to identify those problem we need to first of all admit that our salvation will not be realized by our own efforts, but by the grace of God. Even when repentance and faith require hard work, we can accomplish that work only by God’s grace.

As we wrestle with materialism, power and security issues in our own lives, we must keep our eyes fixed steadily on the cross of Christ. It is through the cross that we will experience Easter new life. Which brings us to the Romans text... Did you catch that? “The word is near you...” Just the opposite of the wilderness. The word is Jesus Christ, and he is always there for you. There is a certain generosity in the Lord: “the Lord is generous to all who call on him... *Everyone* who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.” No matter what wilderness you may be in, nothing can separate you from God’s love.

I have been praying for the people of Ukraine enduring the terrible and unjust violence of the Russian invasion. There are millions of people living with the threat of death and over a million people displaced and many more to come because of this war. I’m deeply saddened by the senseless violence, but also encouraged by the stories of brave resistance the Ukrainians are showing.

It reminded me of one of true heroes I’ve met in my life. Noble is Sri Lankan and I met him and his wife and two daughters as they faithfully attended the early morning service at the American Church in Paris. They would greet me at the door after services. For years we only shared pleasantries until Kim and I were invited to have lunch with Noble and his family. As the drive to their house was about an hour, I asked him, “So, Noble, tell me about how you came to France?” And he said it was many years ago. His daughter in the back seat, scolded him loudly, “Daddy, tell pastor the truth!”

My curiosity was peaked! ... It was during the Tamil war and the Sri Lankan army had rounded up and imprisoned about a thousand students in his city. The rumor was spreading that dozens were being executed. Noble’s father was a leader in the community, and so Noble had not been arrested. Fearing for the life of his friends, one night, Noble led a group of young men to the

⁴ Sam Loewenberg, “Learning from Failure” (*New York Times*, February 1, 2013, online article), referenced February 2, 2013: <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/02/03/opinion/sunday/learning-from-research-failure.html?emc=eta1>.

prison and set hundreds of students free who otherwise might have been killed. The Army started hunting for him, and Noble fled to Germany. He made his way to France and lived in a refugee camp. He learned French and was able to get work, married and started a family. He came to church, he said, because he was thankful to God for sparing his life and enabling him to free so many prisoners. He also was so thankful for the gospel of welcome and inclusion for all people. He knew the pain of war and the violence of strong man politics. He found in the gospel hope for the world and said he needed to be reminded every day of God's love for him and all people.

Noble is a fitting name for my friend. He is one of my real-life heroes, walking through the wilderness of war with courage and integrity, risking his life to save others. He would say it was nothing, but I wonder if I would have the same courage? How will I do justice, love mercy and walk humbly with God?

Lent is a time to purposefully walk into the wilderness places of life, to figure out what are the problems that need solving in our lives and in our world, and practice walking in the way of Christ's self-giving love. Walking in the way of the wilderness is to learn to walk the way of the cross to resurrection life.

Friends, as we come to the table today, may we first remember that we are all God's beloved children... And as we wrestle with our own sin and temptation, remember that God has already taken care of that for us, that we have but to call on the name of the Lord and believe. And following Christ's way, the word is near to us and we are called to practice the self-giving love of Jesus. As we walk through our own way in the wilderness, we will realize we are not alone, and together we may move from despair to hope, from war to peace, from hunger to fullness, from death to life, from grief to joy, from the Good Friday cross to Easter resurrection!

In the name of the One who is our Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer. Amen.