

In the Wilderness  
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"In the Wilderness" Pilgrim Church UCC, First Sunday in Lent, (Luke 4:1-13) February 14, 2016

This morning we encounter Jesus right after his baptism—still basking in the glow of God’s acceptance, still shaking the waters of the Jordan from his body—led by the Holy Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil for forty days. Lent begins with a weak and famished Jesus and a gloating, deceitful Satan facing each other. Now many of us may doubt that the devil was really present with Jesus in that wilderness environment or that these temptations are literal. Though evil does exist in our world (by whatever name we choose to call it) and temptations can trip us up on our paths. So we’ll explore this story symbolically and then consider the implications for you and me.

In the First Temptation, the devil goes right for the jugular. The tempter says, “If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread.”[1] Remember Jesus just heard for the first time that he is God’s Son. The tempter calls that holy moment into question: “If you are the Son of God.” Lutheran Minister Nadia Bolz-Weber reminds us that God’s first move is always to name us and claim us as God’s own. But soon other people try to tell us who we are and to whom we belong. Bolz-Weber writes, “Capitalism, the weight-loss industrial complex, our parents, kids at school—they all have a go at telling us who we are. But only God can do that. Everything else is temptation.”[2] Jesus responds in this moment of vulnerability by quoting scripture: “One does not live by bread alone.”[3] He passed his first test by not doubting his value as God’s beloved.

In the Second Temptation the devil leads Jesus up and shows him all the kingdoms of the world. The devil makes a power play: “To you I will give their glory and all this authority; for it has been given over to me, and I give it to anyone I please. If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours.”[4] If Jesus right then and there ruled all the kingdoms of the world, he would have ruled justly and shown mercy. He could have set things right, but where would his power have come from? Even though Jesus was so good to his core, could he have ruled justly if he had to bow down to evil in order to gain power? Jesus declines by telling the devil that God alone should be worshipped and served.

In the Third Temptation the devil takes him to Jerusalem, to the highest point on the Temple. The tempter again calls Jesus’ identity into question, “If you are the Son of God” and tells Jesus to throw himself down. For it is written in scripture: “‘He will command his angels concerning you, to protect you’ and ‘on their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.’” This is a test of heroism and what kind of Messiah Jesus will be. Is he going to be the warrior king, the super hero who can leap from buildings in a single bound and be saved at the last instant because he is God’s Son? Or is he going to be a Messiah folks never imagined possible, the Son of God who will suffer and die on a cross? Jesus says, “Do not put the Lord your God to the test.”[5] Jesus passed the final temptation by seeing through evil’s call to test God, and the devil leaves him for now.

In the end, Jesus didn’t teach or heal to prove that he really was God’s Son or God’s self-revelation in our world. Instead, Jesus worked his wonders to meet people right where they were. Just as Jesus still meets us right where we are, abiding with us no matter what tempts us to stray from God’s love.

There's a great deal here that pertains to us. Do we have moments where we doubt our identity as God's beloved sons and daughters? Do we have moments where we could get a lot of power but would make a deal with the devil (if you will) in order to be in that position? Do we have moments where we test God or think that we can go it alone and don't even need God in our lives? What is it that tempts us, that plants doubt in our midst and causes us to stray from God's life-giving ways?

It may be helpful to consider Jesus in the wilderness as a coming of age story or coming into your own story that most people face. All around the world there are ceremonies and traditions young people in particular undertake to move into adulthood. Jewish young people have bar or bat mitzvahs and Christian young people have Confirmation. In Latino cultures, young women celebrate their Quinceanera. Some Inuits go out into the wilderness with their fathers when they're 11 or 12 to test their hunting skills and get acclimated to the arctic weather. The Maasai of Kenya and Tanzania have a number of initiations young men most undergo before they become warriors in the tribe. The night before the ceremony they sleep outside in the forest and return at dawn for singing and dancing. The young men drink a mixture of alcohol, cow's blood, and milk and eat large quantities of meat. After these festivities, they are circumcised which marks their transformation from a boy into a warrior.[6]

Human beings are meaning-makers. We tell stories and have rituals that help us mark important moments, moments when we move from one part of our lives into another. Perhaps this wilderness story is about Jesus moving from those safe and beautiful waters of baptism in the Jordan River to encounter the harsh realities of the world in the wilderness. Knowing that not everyone was going to believe he's God's Son, some people would want him to use his power and influence for their own purposes, and some people would want him to test God or be the Messiah they wanted him to be. All of this going against God naming Jesus and claiming Jesus as God's own. All of this going against God being the One who tells us who we all are—beloved people of God.

So that's one way to consider Jesus' temptation in the wilderness—that it's about Jesus coming into his own. The wilderness and overcoming those three temptations represents a moment where he knows who he is and to whom he belongs. With that knowledge in his head and heart, he can go out into the world to serve God. We have those times in our lives: times when we are tested, we are refined in fire, and then we understand on a deeper level who we are and to whom we belong. We can go out from that moment of testing and temptation with our heads held high because we have come into our own. We have fought the good fight, we have finished the race.

The other understanding we can glean from Jesus tempted in the wilderness is that the wilderness environment is not unique to Jesus in the least. We will have times when we are there too. Not necessarily physically speaking, but in a spiritual wilderness. The wilderness by definition is an uncultivated, uninhabited, and inhospitable region. The wilderness is wild and natural—where few people live. In our spiritual lives, the wilderness is when we feel pretty isolated from one another and perhaps even from ourselves and from God. Though perhaps the wilderness provides the landscape for us to do some profound spiritual wrestling with God.

Here's what I mean: the last two Januarys I've been out in Arizona for a week with my UCC Next Generation Leadership Initiative cohort—and we stay at a Conference Center in Carefree, Arizona. It's a planned community with no street lights to take care of light pollution and even the telephone poles are in camouflage to look like cacti. When we go on walks it's always fun to spot the fake cactus telephone pole because it's a little too perfect and if you get close you can hear some buzzing! The drive from the airport in Phoenix out to the Conference Center takes a long time, and the further you drive the more the landscape changes into the wilderness of sorts. This last January, the shuttle driver asked why I was out here. And upon

hearing that I'm a minister going to a clergy educational gathering, his comment was that there would be plenty of time to read the Good Book because there's not much else to do! We're always warned not to wander around at night because we'll likely get lost in the desert and there's coyotes and scorpions in addition to cacti everywhere and who wants to run into a cactus in the dark?

Being in that rocky landscape with some mountains and cacti and gravel and heat and big sky that you can see for miles and miles—it does something to a person, to be in that environment. The educational and spiritual work we have undertaken together has profoundly affected my ministry. It's somehow easier to do purposeful spiritual work when you're in the wilderness.

When we find ourselves in a spiritual wilderness—a wild, inhospitable place where it seems like few people are here with us, how do we handle it? When we know that despite the fake cacti there are coyotes and scorpions and real cacti out there that can cause harm if we're not careful—what do we do with that? If we turn to the example of Jesus led out into the wilderness for forty days, we know that we will have moments of profound doubt and temptation on our journeys of faith. The wilderness experience physically or spiritually is not unique to Jesus.

In the end, when we're in the wilderness, we can trust that God is with us, and that we are not alone. We can trust that we belong to God and that God has named us and claimed us as God's own. We can trust that evil never gets the last word, and that love wins—always has and always will. Let us keep trust in our hearts as we journey with Jesus in the wilderness throughout this Holy Season of Lent. Thanks be to God. Amen.

[1] Luke 4:3, NRSV.

[2] Nadia Bolz-Weber, *Pastrix: The Cranky, Beautiful Faith of a Sinner & Saint*, 139.

[3] Luke 4:4.

[4] Luke 4:6-7.

[5] Luke 4:10-11 and Luke 4:12.

[6] Leticia Pfeffer and Christina Nunez, "13 amazing coming of age traditions from around the world," September 9, 2014, *Global Citizen*, <https://www.globalcitizen.org/en/content/13-amazing-coming-of-age-tradit...>