

¹ Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tested by the devil. ² He fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterward he was famished. ³ The tempter came and said to him, “If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread.” ⁴ But he answered, “It is written: ‘One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.’” ⁵ Then the devil took him to the holy city and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, ⁶ 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.’” ⁷ But Jesus said to him, “Again it is written, ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’” ⁸ Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their glory, ⁹ and he said to Jesus: “All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me.” ¹⁰ Then Jesus said to him, “Away with you, Satan! for it is written: ‘Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.’” ¹¹ Then the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him.

Response to the Word

One: This is the Word of God for the people of God.

All: Thanks be to God!

Matthew 4:1-11

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“Lent 1: Into the Wilderness”

Rev. Amy Terhune

I’ve been thinking a lot lately about wilderness. Not that this is particularly unusual here in Michigan. In Michigan, we get a little gooey-eyed and weak-kneed at the thought of wilderness. Nothing delights a native Michigander more than the thought of a crisp quiet November morning in the deer blind, or an afternoon ski through the wintery trails in the back woods, or a gorgeous sunset over the dunes at the end of a perfect summer day, or the joy of learning back in your camp-chair, watching the sparks fly upward towards the starry sky at a rustic UP campsite. For me, memories of canoeing the lakes and streams of Northern Wisconsin and Michigan when out “on the trail” with camp Manito-Wish are some my best memories. And hiking the trails at Camp Kinawind after dinner was a favorite. And I’ll never forget watching a moose feed quietly on lily pads at the edge of the Keweenaw Bay with friends up in Hancock after preaching one night way out at Jacobsville. For a while when I was up in Hancock, I was the only person from the UP on the Board of Ordained Ministry, so I’d drive down to Port Huron by myself, and even in March, I’d stop along US-2 to enjoy the northern coastline of Lake Michigan. Not that this was true wilderness. It wasn’t, but I’ve never been one to pass up a chance to enjoy nature’s beauty without a whole bunch of other people around.

I once heard some comedian joke that America was the only country in the world where people pay a quarter of million dollars for a house and then leave it for two weeks every summer to go live a tent in the woods. It’s also the only place where people pay \$40 Grand for a vehicle, only to leave it behind and go walk dozens of miles on a trail through the mountains. Which I suppose is a legitimate means of getting a laugh. But our world is loud, blaringly so. Our world is dazzling, blindingly so. Our world is sensory overload. And the wilderness is where I find reprieve. Space to think. Quiet. Reconnection with God.

But at the risk of being utterly predictable, let us ask if maybe this blaring, blinding, bleak and brutal may be the real wilderness? If the world around me begins to look unrecognizable, is that wilderness? Or is it the inbreaking of something altogether new – an inching towards the Kingdom of God among us? You can't always tell. At least, I can't.

Which is why we come back at the start of every Lent to Jesus in the wilderness. Scripturally speaking, the wilderness is not where you want to be. The wilderness is where you wind up when you lose direction, when you're in danger, when everything falls apart. Hagar fled to the wilderness to escape Sarah's cruelty. Moses fled to the wilderness when he could no longer find a home in the Pharaoh's palace where he grew up. The Israelites wandered in the wilderness long enough for a whole generation to die off before God led them into the promised land. David and Elijah fled to the wilderness in fear for their lives. But the wilderness is also where one finds God. It's where Hagar was nourished and Moses encountered a burning bush. It's where the Israelites made covenant and David found faith and purpose. It's where Elijah went for forty days and forty nights, where he was fed, and given water in a draught, and weathered the wind and the earthquake and the fire before God spoke to him in the sheer silence that followed.

And the wilderness is where the Spirit takes Jesus immediately following his baptism. And there he faces temptation. This marks the real beginning of Jesus' public ministry to the world. Matthew offers a fascinating account, layered with meaning and depth. It serves first to clarify what is meant by the title "Son of God". At his baptism, God speaks nearly the same words you heard last week during the transfiguration. "This my son, my beloved, with whom I am well pleased." But in the wilderness, the devil whispers, "If you are the son of God...". Did you hear that? IF...you are the Son of God. You know what that voice is attempting to do, don't you? It's trying to stoke up a tiny little flicker of doubt—something to make Jesus question who he is. But, Jesus literally does not bite. He did not come into the world to serve himself or to meet his own needs. He came for our sakes—he came to satisfy a hunger that goes deeper than the stomach.

This lesson further serves to identify Jesus with the heritage of Israel. 40 days in the wilderness mirrors the 40 years the Israelites wandered with Moses before reaching the Promised Land. The temptation to make bread takes us back to the gift of manna—sent to the Israelites by God to teach them to rely on the God who provides. Jesus will not forsake that learning by taking matters into his own hands. The temptation to throw himself from the pinnacle of the temple reminds us of the Israelites plea for instant gratification and flashy display. When Moses didn't come back down the mountain, the grew discouraged and built themselves a golden calf to worship. But Jesus will not put God to the test. Jesus isn't interested in putting on a show. And finally, the temptation to take power over the world, to join league with the devil, reminds us of the Israelites demand to God: Give us a king—make us like our neighbors. But Jesus knows power comes from God alone—God is the only ruler of the world. Jesus came to save, and he will become the savior because he fulfills the law of God's covenant and bridges the gap we cannot span by ourselves.

Don't underestimate the lure of those temptations. Scripture says that Jesus was tempted. He knows what it's like to wander the wilderness. Which is why he understands the temptations you and I face. But in the end, Jesus was able to follow those temptations out to the inevitable conclusions. He saw behind the lie we tell ourselves – that it's no big deal.

A. Todd Coget relates a story that illustrates this point so perfectly, and if I've told this before, then I'm sorry. He writes: "During my college years—in my infinite wisdom—it occurred to me that it made no sense to stop at red traffic lights when there was clearly no traffic around. So I began to stop only briefly—just long enough to check for cars—and then proceed. My stops became shorter and

shorter, and eventually I no longer stopped at all—I simply checked out the landscape well in advance and—if no cars were coming—proceeded full speed through the red light.

“One day something changed all of that, and I’ve never run a red light since. I was approaching an isolated light in an area where there was rarely traffic in the busiest of times. I had already checked out the landscape and was near the empty intersection when a car topped the hill to my left. It was too far away to pose any threat, but it did pose a problem: it was a police car.

“But that is not what changed my ways, because I got the car stopped and received no more punishment than a dirty glance. What scared me enough to put an end to that practice was what occurred in the split seconds between spotting the patrol car and getting the car stopped. In that instant, my foot moved from the gas pedal to the brake pedal, and then back to the gas pedal! I did not will it to do that; my foot just did it. Reflexively. My foot did that because that is how I had trained my mind to respond. I had continually ignored what had once been a clear signal to stop—a red light—and as a result that signal was no longer clear.

“The same occurs with sin. Our God-given conscience gives us warning signals, and we can heed those signals or ignore them. If we ignore them often enough, we may eventually fail to recognize them as signals at all. [adapted from a story contributed by A. Todd Coget to www.sermoncentral.com.]

Jesus learned to recognize that underneath the dismissive “it’s no big deal” was a temptation to compromise his identity. Friends, we really do have some autonomy over who we are in the world. God gives us agency, also known as free will. All of us make choices. And you can choose to be who God calls you to be. This isn’t to say that we don’t ever drop the ball. Every last one of us has, at some point, given into temptation. We’ve let anger, greed, lust, or apathy get the better of us.

Years ago, in a previous appointment, the church received a rather sizeable financial gift – about \$15,000. I had a pretty strong idea of what I wanted to do with that money to advance the mission and ministry of the church. One of the trustees had a very different idea. Now he was a friend – was about my age, starting a young family – we had a lot in common. But we both had strong opinions. He thought my ideas were impractical, I thought his were shortsighted. And one afternoon in the office, we got into it. He pushed my buttons, I pushed his, and before long, I informed him that if he pushed his plan, then he clearly did not really care about the church’s future. Which was not true. He cared very much. He just saw it differently. In that moment, I didn’t see his humanity. All I saw was my anger, and I gave into this temptation to prove I’m right, that I’m righteous, that I’m more caring. And it’s not just a mean word I said. Years ago, the Bishop put her hands on my head and ordained me saying “take thou authority as an elder in the church...”. And by golly, I did. I wielded my pastoral authority and breached trust. In the immediate wake of what I said, I stammered out an apology. But the damage was done. Once we say something like that, we can’t take it back. It still hurts, even when one apologizes.

And in the internal agony of guilt that I went through following that exchange, I was forced to reckon with the fact that I couldn’t change it and couldn’t take it back, but I could learn from it. And the inescapable wisdom that followed that moment was the realization that that wasn’t the person I wanted to be. It came back to identity. That selfish wielding of pastoral authority – that wasn’t the way I wanted to represent my God or my faith. And in the years since then, I’ve faced my share of challenges. Building a parsonage in Hancock. Weathering the pandemic. Leading a visioning process here. Dealing with the current political landscape and how it manifests among us and on social media. I still get mad sometimes – that hasn’t changed – but that moment comes back to me when I start feeling anger stir in me. And I know now who I want to be and how I want to lead. I’ve learned to

recognize signs. Red lights that need to stay red light so that I can lead responsibly, humbly, within my human limitations. I'm not perfect at it. It's an ongoing process.

We enter the Lenten season and find ourselves in a wilderness we don't really want to be in. But while Lent is a season, the lessons and disciplines it teaches aren't seasonal. They're daily truth. Temptation. Sin. Compromised identity. Grace. Redemption. Forgiveness. And above all, an awareness that when we fail, this does not mean that we are failures. When we do succumb to temptation, and we all will sometimes, it is not the end of our chances to succeed. Confess. Repent. Move on. Keep trying. Leaning on God's grace is neither weakness nor failure. Quite the contrary. It is our strength and our only hope.

"Let me close by telling you about something that Dr. Richard Dawson learned serving in the British Army during World War II. Dawson spent some time in a brutal Japanese prison camp. Daily, he watched soldiers dying of treatable illnesses. Most of the illnesses and infections came from drinking contaminated water in the rivers and swamps near the camp. A little stomach virus, some dehydration—all perfectly treatable during peace-time—meant certain death in the prison camp.

"One day, Dr. Dawson remembered a piece of advice someone once told him: the water inside of an unripe coconut is almost always sterile. Coconuts grew in abundance around the banks of the swamps. Dr. Dawson began cutting down coconuts and using the water inside as an intravenous fluid for his dehydrated men. Soon, many of the men recovered their health.

"Dr. Dawson marveled at the fact that those coconuts, full of pure, sterile water, grew beside contaminated swamps and rivers. Evidently, the root system of the tree took in contaminated water—which was killing the men—and turned it into something pure and life-giving.

"What a beautiful analogy of what Jesus does in our lives. Jesus takes that foul, debilitating part of our life and purifies it. [4 ¶s from Dr. Paul Brand, *God's Forever Feast* (Grand Rapids, MI.: Discovery House Publishers, 1993), pp.90-93; as used in "As The World Turns" by King Duncan, www.Sermons.com.] Jesus understands what we face—He's been there. He overcame temptation because he never forgot who he was—God's son. The same is true for us. We are all God's children. We are sinful beings, but not unloved ones. We fail, but we are not failures. We may marvel at this reality, but Jesus believed us to be worth sacrificing and dying for. The least we can do is sacrifice and live for Him. If, at its root, temptation is the lure to be other than who God would have us be, then we must remember that we are God's children. That is our most basic identity—it's who we are—every last one of us. Keep that identity firmly in mind, for it is God's love, God's acceptance, God's grace that makes it possible for us to refuse to be anything less than all that God has created us to be. Thanks be to God. Amen.