

## Luke 4:1-13

Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, <sup>2</sup>where for forty days he was tempted by the devil. He ate nothing at all during those days, and when they were over, he was famished. <sup>3</sup>The devil said to him, 'If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread.' <sup>4</sup>Jesus answered him, 'It is written, "One does not live by bread alone." ' <sup>5</sup> Then the devil led him up and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. <sup>6</sup> And the devil said to him, '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. <sup>7</sup>If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours.'<sup>8</sup> Jesus answered him, 'It is written, "Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him." ' <sup>9</sup> Then the devil took him to Jerusalem, and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, 'If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here, <sup>10</sup>for it is written, "He will command his angels concerning you, to protect you", <sup>11</sup>and "On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone." ' <sup>12</sup> Jesus answered him, 'It is said, "Do not put the Lord your God to the test." ' <sup>13</sup> When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time.

### **We Need Time in the Wilderness**

"Return to the Lord with all your heart," is the title of our Lenten worship series. Lent has traditionally been the time for new converts and confirmands to prepare themselves to join the Church, but once they joined the Church the assumption was that they would stay in the Church. So returning to the Lord is not supposed to be an annual ritual where we "give up" or "take on" something for forty days then go back our old ways for the other 325 days of the year. Returning to the Lord is about realizing our alienation from God and committing our lives, not forty days of a year, to God's service, and once we have come back to the Lord we need to stay with the Lord and serve the Lord from that moment forward.

The reality is, however, that we easily fall prey to temptation. We depart from God quite often, relapsing into sin. I think we make the situation worse by seeing Jesus as simply our way to future salvation, as the one who we depend upon to bring us to heaven, and so with the confidence that our spoken confession of faith has secured us a good place in the afterlife we get comfortable in our sin in this life and content to live in a broken condition – maybe not sinister, but limited in our capacity to love God or neighbor. So Lent comes around and we dwell on our brokenness, give up one of our vices or indulgences for forty days, then go back to our old selves after Easter.

But deep down we're not content being our "old selves." I asked some folks at the Bible study last week how they would live their lives if there was no heaven, no promise of a blissful life after this life. Would they just strive for wealth and power and personal pleasure knowing that this life is all that there is? They thought for a second and said "no." They said that a life of self-gratification does not bring them joy. A life of love of God and neighbor brings us joy. But over and over again we fail at truly loving both God and neighbor and instead pursue selfish interests. What can save us from this vicious cycle of mediocrity? What can strengthen the bonds between us and Jesus so that once Lent is over we don't wave goodbye to Jesus until Advent?

I think we can break this cycle by spending some time in the wilderness – time in communion with God. And I want you to understand that there are three aspects to the wilderness I'm talking about.

First, it is intentional wilderness. Some folks speak of a feeling that they are "in the wilderness" when they mean that they are uncertain or struggling with doubts and fears, but it's usually some terrible life event that has caused them to feel this way. And while they are in this wilderness not much about their life seems to change; they wake up at the same time, eat the same breakfast, work at the same job, watch the same TV shows, and hang out with the same folks. That's not an intentional wilderness; that's an accidental wilderness, and if you're in an accidental wilderness and do nothing to change your life, the only thing that will bring you out of that wilderness will be another accident. Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness, and he went voluntarily, with the intention of building up his relationship with the Father.

Second, it is undistracted wilderness. I know a lot of people who go camping in big RVs that have kitchens, bedrooms, showers, and satellite TV. They may drive their RV to a campground, but I don't call that camping. The point of camping is to connect to nature, and the point of the wilderness is to connect to God. You won't connect very much to God if you leave your cell phone on and have the TV playing in the background, or if you're surfing the internet while trying to pray. You need quiet time, and you should think of quiet time as a date. Not a date where you both go to a movie, but a dinner date, and not a date at a sports bar where there are twenty television sets showing forty different teams playing twelve different sports. I mean a dinner date where you sit down and talk to each other without interruptions.

Third, it is prolonged wilderness. You don't build a relationship with God by going on one date; you do it by committing to regular, intentional, undistracted time together over a long period of time. Most of us won't be able to take forty days to be alone and undistracted with God, but we can commit to a half hour a day every day, uninterrupted. I guarantee you that people who have had a consistent quiet time for a long time have a richer relationship with God than those who don't.

And you need a rich relationship with God if you hope to have any chance of resisting the temptations of this world and engaging in meaningful ministry. Jesus' forty days in the wilderness was the beginning of his lifetime ministry. The Spirit led him into that wilderness to prepare him for what he would be facing through the years, and we can see those same temptations recurring in his life: the temptation to turn stones to bread was more than a temptation to satisfy his personal hunger; it was the temptation to confine his own ministry to relieving the physical hunger and physical suffering of the world, to becoming nothing more than a combination food pantry and physician, and he would have been plenty of followers had he restricted his ministry to addressing the physical needs of humanity. But Jesus came to bring food and healing to our souls, not just our bodies, and so he resists this temptation by quoting Deuteronomy and saying that man does not live by bread alone, and if he finished this quote from Deuteronomy he would have said "but by every word that comes from the mouth of God." The second temptation was for Jesus to become a political superstar, to rule all the kingdoms of this world, and that temptation was also one that Jesus would face later in his ministry as there were those who wanted to carry him into Jerusalem

and make him king. But if your goal is to rule the world you have to bow down and worship the ruler of this world, the one who provokes the combative side of our nature in order to dominate others, and Jesus resists by saying, "Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him." The final temptation was a tricky one. The devil is more or less telling Jesus, "Okay, you win. You are the Son of God. Therefore God must intend to protect you from all harm. You're special after all, right? Throw yourself down from this pinnacle and God will surely keep you from harm." But should our service to God be contingent upon God's guarantee of our safety or protection? What is trust if it has conditions attached to it? And so Jesus tells the devil that he will not put God to the test, and of course *this* temptation will reoccur in the Garden of Gethsemane as Jesus prays that there might be another way for him to finish his mission, but ultimately submits to the Father's will.

So I pray that this Lent will not be merely a forty day journey for you, but rather a part of a lifetime journey when you can focus on God, draw closer to him through prayer and fasting. Spend some time in the wilderness to strengthen your resolve to submit to God's authority. And may the peace of God that passes all understanding guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.