

Grace in the Wilderness

Kenneth Kovacs

*First Sunday in Lent
February 26, 2023*

Scripture

Matthew 4:1-11

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

Sermon

We begin the pilgrim journey through Lent with Jesus in the wilderness. The Spirit led him there after his baptism. Immediately after hearing, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased" (Mt. 3:17), the Spirit whisked Jesus off to the wilderness.

There are two things worth noting at the start. First, as I shared, the Spirit of God leads Jesus into the wilderness, not the Tempter. Second, the words of the Tempter, or the devil, are actually part of God's larger purpose or plan for Jesus in the wilderness, what we might call the most outward of outward-bound experiences. And we should probably say a word about the devil. The devil or tempter is often viewed as personified evil who attempts to thwart God's will, a person or force battling with and against God. Will God win or Satan? But the Bible is never in any doubt that God is in control. Even Satan is at the mercy of God. Many of our images of the devil emerged in the Middle Ages; consider Dante Alighieri's (c. 1265-1321) classic *Inferno*. So we should be careful not to project these images back upon scripture. Satan (literally, Ha-Satan in Hebrew), for example, in the story of Job, simply means "adversary" and is, in fact, part of the heavenly throne (see Job 1:6). In other words, Satan is on God's payroll.

Jesus is confronted by the tempter, and the temptations serve a purpose. But we also need to pay close attention to where this is taking place. It's in the wilderness, the desert, the wild places where the call of Yahweh is often heard. It's often the place where one is confronted with the question of identity.

In Matthew's Gospel, Jesus is portrayed as the "New Moses" who gives an old-yet-new teaching; a New Moses who will lead God's people through the wilderness to a new promised land. Where did Moses learn the name of God? On Mount Horeb in the wilderness of Sinai. Where did Moses, the murderer, running from his life, running from the law, later tending his

father-in-law’s sheep, eventually discover his life’s true work and purpose? In the wilderness. Once Moses and the Israelites made it out of Egypt, how did they get to the Promised Land? Through the wilderness. And how long did they wander? Forty years. God intentionally sends Israel on the long way home (see Exodus 13: 17ff). There was a direct road along the coast built by the Egyptians. But God said to go through the wilderness. And through the long journey through the wilderness, Israel learned to trust God to provide for their every need. At the same time, the experience in the wilderness forged them into a people. It forced them to have a consciousness of themselves that they would never have had apart from the wilderness. In fact, the Moses-Jesus parallel is so clear that on every occasion, that the Israelites failed in their wilderness journey – dealing with the threat of hunger (looking for food, not sure about manna), putting God to the test, false worship – Jesus here is faithful.

The temptations serve a purpose. But so does the location: the wilderness or desert. There is a strong connection between the presence and voice of Yahweh and fierce landscapes, whether it’s Sinai or the Judean wilderness (which is a desert), the wilderness of Golgotha, or the wilderness of the human heart. Yahweh seems to dwell and be revealed in these dangerous, potentially life-threatening, limiting kinds of places. The “wild God of Israel” is first known in the wild places, the wilderness places, like deserts that aren’t safe, secure, and tame. Presbyterian theologian Belden Lane suggests, “The God of Sinai is one who thrives on fierce landscapes, seemingly forcing God’s people into wild and wretched climes where trust must be absolute.” [1] Indeed, the three major monotheistic religions of our age all have their origins in desert environments, rooted in experiences of God in these landscapes: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Yahweh says, “The desert will lead you to your heart where I will speak” (Hosea 2:14). It’s a place of desolation. It’s beyond the norm, beyond civilization, the opposite of home. Writing from around the fifth century, Saint Jerome (c. 347-420), who knew a thing or two about deserts and wilderness, said, “Nudo amat eremos.” “The desert loves to strip bare.” The desert is indifferent to human concerns. It takes you out of the center of your world. The wilderness really doesn’t care about you. In his book *Desert Solitaire*, the American naturalist Edward Abbey (1927-1989) writes about his many years living in the deserts of the American Southwest. “The desert says nothing,” he writes. “Completely passive, acted upon but never acting, the desert lies there like the bare skeleton of Being, spare, sparse, austere, utterly worthless, inviting not love but contemplation.” [2]

When we are knocked off center, when we are brought to the edge of existence, when we are forced to contemplate our lives and the world from an entirely new perspective, when we are taken out of our comfort zones, when we are removed from all the noise of our lives and forced to silence all the chatter that fills our ears and our hearts, then – and probably only then – can we begin to hear another voice, a deeper, stiller voice who calls out in love. It’s then—in the gracious threat of silence—we are confronted with ourselves, and not ourselves alone (although that might be a deep fear, that we might be all alone). But deeper than fear, we are confronted with ourselves and ourselves in the presence of the Holy Other, who waits in the silence and speaks from the silence. It’s from hearing that voice and living into what it means that we come to see who we really are.

The Spirit sends Jesus into the wilderness because he needs to answer the question: Who am I? What does the Tempter say first? “If you are the Son of God....” If you are.... In the wilderness, Jesus’ identity is put to the test. Will he be faithful to who he is and what God calls him to be, or will he take the easy route? The wilderness is the place where we discern the call, the vocatus, our vocation, discover a voice, and dare to respond. It’s where we discover who we are and what we are called to do.

We also must be careful because every wilderness experience is not God’s doing. Some people experience the wilderness not as a means of grace but more like a curse. For some, there’s nothing good about the wilderness. The unimaginable horror experienced by the people of Ukraine is not to be seen as God throwing them into the wilderness, destabilizing their lives for them to learn something about themselves—that would be a cruel way to get someone to learn a lesson. Some people live in the wilderness of terminal illness or a chronic illness. That, too, must not be seen as God “causing” something to happen to teach a lesson or as an act of punishment or judgment, or abandonment by God. We have to be careful.

The three temptations Jesus faced were not temptations of doing (doing one thing versus another) but temptations of being or identity – in each temptation, he is tempted to be someone other than the person God has called him to be [3]. These temptations try to pull him away from the voice that told him, “You are my Son, my beloved, in whom I am well-pleased.” Each temptation is trying to get him to deny who he is, settle for someone less than who he is, and settle for less than the purpose of his life [4].

Indeed, the Tempter is trying to beguile Jesus into making the nature of his life and his work too small, to limit the scope and impact of what he can do. In this way, the temptations Jesus faced are not any different from those we all face daily. There are so many forces that prevent us from hearing the voice of our calling, that block the Spirit’s whisper, so many times the Tempter wants us to deny or forget who we are, to deny we are all, right now, by virtue of our baptisms, children of God. So many times, we are tempted to set our sights too low, to settle for gospel-lite, so many times when we personally or collectively as a church risk losing sight of the breadth and height and depth of our calling, when we’re tempted to be “realistic” or “practical,” or that most American of traits, “pragmatic.” [5]

Identity leads to action. Remember who you are, then even the gates of hell cannot prevail against you, Jesus said. (Matthew 16:18). That’s what Jesus discovered in the wilderness. There Jesus discovered who he was and sought to be faithful to his calling. Jesus left the desert, returned to Galilee, and got to work, confessing, proclaiming the Kingdom of God. It’s Jesus’ vision of the Kingdom that stands at the heart of his life and ministry, a vision of God’s gracious intent for the well-being and healing of God’s people, a radical, disruptive vision of grace and love, acceptance, forgiveness, and welcome; a radical, disruptive vision of the limitless generosity of God who loves to be generous; a radical, disruptive vision of God that places at the center of the Kingdom a child, a child who, in Jesus’ time, was worth no more than a slave, lacking status or power, completely vulnerable, and gives her a seat of honor at the joyful feast of the people of God. A radical and disruptive vision because it comes with God’s judgment and assault upon everyone and everything in this universe that attempts to thwart the Kingdom, that harms and destroys “the least of these,” everything in our lives that causes us to forget who we are and what we are to do with our lives. Jesus discovered all this and more in the wilderness. And because he was faithful to God and his calling, he was courageous and bold and had the guts to confess God’s power in the face of the enormous power and brutality of the armies of Caesar. It’s this calling that inevitably led to his death at the hands of the Romans. It was the Roman Empire that crucified Jesus because it could not tolerate the threat Jesus posed by preaching and embodying with his life the gracious Empire of God.

Perhaps this is a new or different way of viewing Jesus’ death. The cross as the consequence of being faithful to his purpose; the cross as the consequence of Jesus being faithful to his work; the cross as the consequence of Jesus being faithful to his calling; the cross was the consequence of Jesus being faithful to his identity. Being faithful to your God-given identity and work comes with a price. To follow him today means something of the same. Our cross is the consequence of

being faithful to our God-given purpose, work, and calling; our cross is the consequence of being faithful to our God-given identity, both as individuals and as the church of Jesus Christ. Perhaps this is what it means to have a cross-shaped, cruciform life, we who bear the name of Christ.

In the wilderness, Jesus comes to grips with who he is (and is not). Ultimately, it becomes the place where Jesus affirms the call and purpose of his life. The same is true for us. There are truths about who we are that can only be found in similar wilderness-type places—and by God’s grace, the Spirit intentionally sends us there to discover them.



Image: *“The Temptation in the Wilderness”* (1898) by Briton Rivière (1840-1920).

Sources

[1] Belden C. Lane, *The Solace of Fierce Landscapes: Exploring Desert and Mountain Spirituality* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 43.

[2] Lane, 43.

[3] Thomas G. Long, *Matthew* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997), 35-39.

[4] Long, 35-39.

[5] A nineteenth-century philosophy, pragmatism had its origins in the United States, as the nation woke up for the nightmare of the Civil War and came to grips with the devastation and loss.