

St. Mark's Episcopal Church  
Albuquerque, New Mexico  
1st Sunday of Lent - Year A Feb. 26, 2023  
Text: Matthew 4:1-11  
Title: The No.2 Pencil of your Life  
Preacher: Christopher McLaren

In Mark's Gospel Jesus' time in the wilderness sounds more like a pop-quiz. The whole test is contained in a few brief verses. "And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and angels waited on him." That's it just these two pithy little sentences about Jesus' wilderness exam.

John doesn't even include the story in his gospel, but Matthew and Luke both give us the longer version with Jesus going toe to toe with the enemy in a battle of wits and scripture quoting that makes a lot of Episcopalians uneasy. Jesus' battle of wits with Satan points out some very important things. Most importantly is that the answer "No" is one of the most significant spiritual practices you can ever cultivate in the face of temptation.

So when Satan offers Jesus more of the things we are all tempted to run after more food, more stuff, more status, more power, more safety Jesus says no each time. How is Jesus able to resist temptation? One might say he is a "Bible quoting wonderkid" which I'm sure makes some of us wonder about your own biblical literacy. More importantly the scriptures Jesus quotes tells us that Jesus knew much more than just what the Bible said. Rather Jesus' life shaped by the biblical stories taught him who he was in relationship to God. To know who you are and to whom you belong to is the most powerful defense against temptation. He is able to say, "No" to food that will not satisfy his true hunger, "No" to self-worship instead of worship directed toward the living God, "No" to playing games with God instead of being in a relationship.

But temptations are real for all of us. Their great advantage is that they lie in wait. They are there ahead of us and get to make the first move. In the story of Jesus you will notice that the devil initiates contact, decides the subject matter and suggests a plan of action. It is a reminder that temptation can put us on our back foot. In fact when you really look at the story, the devil moves Jesus around to the pinnacle of the temple and the top of a mountain and it is only after the 3rd temptation that Jesus is able to say, "scram, away with you Satan and is finally back in control. Temptations can be persistent, alluring and powerful and Jesus' battle reminds us that this is what the human domain is like. We need strength to push back, patience to discern, and support to maintain our true identity as children of God.

What is the nature of temptation in our lives? One thing that is true the temptation often feels like we are being pulled along too quickly. We don't have enough time to think it all through, to consult with others or consider all the implications. Speed and pressure are often essential features of temptation. "You have to do this now or else!" Sometimes when we look back at our failures we see that we were certainly led astray and that we might have been able to resist if we could just have applied the brakes.

Of course there are very different levels of temptation. The dessert cart is quite a bit different than being offered a bribe or told to fudge the books or lose your job. We can laugh about the extra flan or piece of cake but it's a bit different when our moral life is on the line, our identity as a truthful person. But in real ways every temptation has a dimension about it that touches on our identity, who we truly are desire to be.

The temptations of Jesus are centered in his spiritual identity, "If you are the Son of God." Underneath all temptations is the possibility of being less than you are, or acting out of what is not your best self. It's when we don't know who we are, forget who we are, are confused about who we are that we succumb to temptations. I can remember my mother saying to me as I went out the door on the weekends, "Christopher, remember who you are!" A variation of that was a friend of mine whose mother would shout out, "Remember your great grandfather gave up everything he had to come to America on a ship!" When we do know who we are, we can reach for resources to help us resist and avoid temptation.

But remembering who you are is not all that easy. While tempted in the wilderness, Jesus remembers, "every word that came from the mouth of God." And the most recent word that Jesus has heard is at his baptism, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased (Matt. 3:17). These are the words Jesus has been meditating on in the wilderness for 40 days (a long time). And we too are bidden to meditate on the words of scripture in the Lenten invitation. "I invite you therefore in the name of the Church to the observance of a holy Lent, by self-examination and repentance; by prayer, fasting, and self-denial; and by reading and meditating on God's holy word." It was a life-giving activity for Jesus and it can be for us as well. At the Contemplative Prayer retreat we began to work on a breath prayer that would help to connect us to God and sneak a word of beauty and identity into our hearts and souls. There were many different ideas but they were all powerful ways of reminding us of who we are. Father hold me in your loving arms, Spirit guide me along the way, Jesus calm the storm within me.

One final word about temptation I suppose is that when you are facing troubling or questionable offerings, slow things down. Each of us need time to think about things, talk them over with trusted companions and reflect on what it might mean. We need to think theologically about the moments and ask ourselves who are we as sons and daughters and siblings of God and what kinds of actions are appropriate to our status as children of God. Pick friends that can help you tell the difference between temptation and options or are not swayed by your reaching out to a fantasy life. We all need allies to fight off temptations when they come. And the best way to avoid temptation is to know who you are and to stay in touch with a stronger yes because of this.

Knowing who you are and to whom you belong are no small matters and in a real way they are the purpose of this Lenten season. Lent is wilderness time, the Israelites spent 40 years wandering in the wilderness toward the promised land preparing for freedom by unlearning slavery and Jesus was tested in the wilderness directly after hearing that beautiful voice from heaven saying, "You are my beloved, with you I am well pleased."

Wilderness is important, not because we live in New Mexico and are surrounded by so much of it, but because in one way or another each of us has already been there. Maybe it was the wilderness of the Emergency Room after the accident or the look of the doctor as she delivered your test results, it may have been the empty feeling as you left the lawyers office in separate cars, the despair as you cleaned out your desk at work, or the sinking feeling when you saw the lights of the police car in your rear-view mirror. Wilderness comes in all shapes and sizes, and it is always personal. We all know what wilderness feels like, you look around for help, for comfort, for power, for food and water, for protection and all you see is the distant horizon broken up by scrub-brush and sand with the faint sound of the devil's laughter in the air.

Yes, I know most of us are not looking for testing in the wilderness. We'd rather skip that exam, thank you very much. Wilderness is not generally something you seek out, rather it is something that finds you, just like it found Jesus. But what we can say is that wilderness is the God-breathed opportunity to discover who you really are and to whom you belong. Wilderness strips away the non-essentials offering the opportunity to see our life with a clarity of purpose that is difficult to experience any other way.

Remember, Jesus was driven into the wilderness by the Spirit. It was in that wilderness with nothing to eat and no trustworthy friends to turn toward while being offered cheap ways out, that Jesus discovered who he was. In the end, Jesus knew what it meant to be filled with the Spirit, he knew how to master his appetites, how to take responsibility for his own choices, he knew his purpose and how to make sure that he was not distracted by the myriad of easy and attractive escapes. "In the end, Jesus discovered that the very Spirit that led him into the wilderness could be trusted to bring him through the wilderness."

So what does all this wilderness talk have to do with us? As one preacher put it, "The wisdom about the value of the wilderness is just about lost, .....lost to popular American culture for sure and lost even to the Christian tradition that is charged with preserving it. Churches that still observe Lent may get a dose of it every year around this time, even if it is reduced to cutting down on how much you drink or putting a dollar in a box for every dessert you skip. The kernel of the wisdom is still there: that anyone who wants to follow Jesus all the way to the cross needs the kind of clarity and grit that is found only in the wilderness." (Taylor)

Every year the wisdom of our sacred calendar offers us a period of wilderness from Ash Wednesday to Good Friday (not counting Sundays, which are always a feast of the resurrection) It is a time when many people "give-up" things that they often enjoy, in order to put a little wilderness in their lives. At times that wilderness can seem awfully lush, like giving up red meat on Fridays in New Orleans when a shrimp Po-boy will substitute nicely. At other times the things people "give-up" really do seem to be life-altering. This year when my wife Maren was trying to explain Mardi Gras to a group of students, the conversation turned naturally to Lent for one of her students. This young girl started telling the class what she was giving up for Lent which included graphic novels so that she could concentrate on reading chapter books that would be more challenging. This change had been discussed among her teachers and parents for a while and the shift, the change is happening this Lent. She also reported to the class that she was also giving up Netflix and watching TV on her ipad so that she could read more. Not to be outdone some of the boys in the class began to proclaim what they would be giving up, this video game

or that one, others chimed in about giving up things too and suddenly there was a kind of Lenten Revival happening in my wife's class that seemed unlikely and hilarious. Obviously the conversation had to be shut down, the Lenten discipline fest subdued, lest parents find themselves wondering what is being taught at that school? But already this year I've heard of people taking significant steps of pruning things out of their lives to create a little space, a little wilderness, a little want. I know people who have taken apps off their phones that they spend far too much time on. People have decided to change the way they look at their email or bring work home. I'm still astonished by a member who one year gave up email. I sometimes wonder what it would mean to give up my cell phone for chunks of time during the day. I think it is worth considering what giving something significant would do for you rather than to you. What need would it expose? What might you learn about yourself in a deep down way by giving something up that you could otherwise not have known.

Why not decide to embrace the season of Lent, do a little spring-cleaning of your soul for the next 6 weeks. Do something counter-cultural and dare to do with less, practice simplicity rather than complexity, divest instead of acquire, slow-down instead of speed-up. These are sure pathways into wilderness.

Lent's invitation to a wilderness exam is not trying to tell you that your life is worthless now or that you are a spiritual imposter. No, it is an invitation to strip away the non-essentials so that you can discover if the life you are living is the one you are really longing to live, the one that God is calling you into in that ridiculously hard to hear still small voice. The point of fasting from a meal or two is not really to become hungry, it's to use that hunger to discern the deeper hungers in your life.

So what will you give up for Lent that might actually lead you into a kind of voluntary wilderness? Only you know what kind of devil lurks in your life and what bag of tricks he uses on you over and over again.

What would it mean to not take any work home with you during Lent, leave it at the office and become available to your family? What about embracing silence for a little while each day, just sitting, breathing, becoming aware of the Spirit at work in your life and just listening.

The truth is that most of us know that we insulate ourselves from life all the time. We all have our drugs of choice, our anesthesia. And whenever someone decides to give up the, habits, substances, or things that keep us from really feeling the way our lives truly are, it is quite remarkable!

So, what are you using, what is your life-numbing drug of choice? Is it surfing the web when you are lonely, crime shows on television, Twitter or Instagram, a nice Scotch to smooth out the evening, one more Netflix series, or just working too much? No, I'm not saying that any of these things are bad or the devil themselves but I wonder if they might not be the distractions you turn to over and over again when the Spirit is trying to lead you into the wilderness? It is just so easy isn't when you are too tired, or too lonely or too sad to enter one of these temporary oases and miss out on the wilderness of God.

What I'm proposing is what spiritual masters have called the *via negativa*, the way of negation for many centuries. And the fruit of this labor does not come quickly or easily. It takes time for this kind of spiritual discipline to bear fruit. That of course is why we have 40 days of Lent, to practice, and practice, and practice. Without the Internet or texting or television the night could seem rather long. You will be tempted to feel that things are not going well with all this wilderness adventure stuff that pesky meddling priest talked about. You may think you liked the forests of distraction quite a lot better as they offered so much more cover and protection from actually feeling your life. You may even wonder, "Where the devil is God in all this quiet?"

First, remember to breath, breath deep and easy and often. Sense the Spirit at work in you. Let your breath form prayers for your journey. In all likelihood you will make it through the first night without the new Netflix show or that glass of wine or your social media page you are so comfortable with. It may take a while to settle in, to get quiet enough to hear your own breathing and to recognize the chatter of temptation behind it all. But in the midst of it you will discover that your life is speaking to you and you are alive in a new way to God's Spirit.

There will be fearful voices in you mind telling you that all this sacrifice is a waste of time. The devil's of your life are sure to tell you that all this wilderness is going to kill you but the truth is it rarely does. In fact, quite the opposite is true, it is only when we have stripped away the protective habits, lived in the quietness for a while and taken in the clean desert air that we begin to rediscover the scent of new life around and within us.

You may be thinking that all this talk of giving things up is not your jam. That you've really decided to take something on to add something into your life that seems important and worthwhile. Of course, that is a fantastic idea and certainly in keeping with the notion of a Lenten discipline of studying scripture, spiritual reading or beginning to practice silence or a particular kind of prayer on a more regular basis. I commend this aspect of Lent to each of us and Lord knows we've offered several options for the spiritually curious. But I still wonder aloud if it might not be helpful to consider actually giving up something in order to make room for the new practice.

But of course, I cannot tell you what your wilderness exam should look like. Only you know where to start your studies. I can only tell you that the pop-quiz is nothing compared to the real exam. Giving up of chocolate is nothing like listening to your life. I do know that the Lenten invitation to wilderness is worth the trip, for it is the way to discover that only God can satisfy our real appetites. The wilderness is a difficult place but just as it was for Jesus, the Spirit who leads us into the wilderness is also able to lead you out again, toward the hope and joy and trust that come from Worshipping and serving God with all your heart and soul and strength, in your real life. So please clear off your desks and take out the No.2 pencil of your life for the invitation to your wilderness exam is here.

*I am deeply indebted and thankful for the sermon of Barbara Brown Taylor on this passage entitled *The Wilderness Exam* that served as the inspiration for this sermon. I am also indebted to John Shea's writing on the nature of temptation for this sermon. I've worked hard to make it my own and more importantly I hope to make the wilderness exam my own as well in this season of Lent.*

