

WILDERNESS

*Sermon preached by the Rev. Douglas Clark, February 14, 2016 – Lent I
Higganum (9:00 a.m.) and Haddam (10:30 a.m.) Congregational Churches
Making Disciples. Making a Difference.*

(The reading from the Hebrew Bible is from the book of Deuteronomy, chapter 6, verses 10-18.)

When the LORD your God has brought you into the land that he swore to your ancestors, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, to give you—a land with fine, large cities that you did not build, houses filled with all sorts of goods that you did not fill, hewn cisterns that you did not hew, vineyards and olive groves that you did not plant—and when you have eaten your fill, take care that you do not forget the LORD, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. The LORD your God you shall fear; him you shall serve, and by his name alone you shall swear. Do not follow other gods, any of the gods of the peoples who are all around you, because the LORD your God, who is present with you, is a jealous God. The anger of the LORD your God would be kindled against you and he would destroy you from the face of the earth. Do not put the LORD your God to the test, as you tested him at Massah.

You must diligently keep the commandments of the LORD your God, and his decrees, and his statutes that he has commanded you. Do what is right and good in the sight of the LORD, so that it may go well with you, and so that you may go in and occupy the good land that the LORD swore to your ancestors to give you.

(The reading from the Christian Testament is from the gospel of Luke, chapter 4, verses 1-13.)

Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, 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. The devil said to him, “If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread.” Jesus answered him, “It is written, ‘One does not live by bread alone.’” Then the devil led him up and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. 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. If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours.” Jesus answered him, “It is written, ‘Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.’” 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, for it is written, ‘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.’” Jesus answered him, “It is said, ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’” When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time.

This hasn't been a good year for resolutions for me—at least not until this past Thursday. My one New Year's resolution was not to make any New Year's resolutions—which probably sounds a little quirky, since it's logically inconsistent. As Lent was approaching, I had a hard time figuring out what to give up for Lent. Especially since the first Sunday in Lent is also Valentine's Day, which is not a good time to give up chocolate.

It wasn't until the day after Ash Wednesday that I resolved to give up bread for Lent. This will be a stretch for me. In spite of what Jesus says to Satan about not living by bread alone, bread is the one food I would want to have with me if I were stranded on a proverbial desert island.

The good news for me in this resolution is that Sundays during Lent aren't counted in the forty days. Even during Lent, every Sunday is a little Easter, which means that on Sundays I can, if I choose, have bread with every meal. Fasting from bread for **six** days at a time is less rigorous than fasting from bread for **forty** days.

Perhaps bread was the one food Jesus missed the most when he fasted for forty days in the wilderness. Perhaps Satan knew this about Jesus, which may help to explain why he first challenged, Jesus to demonstrate his divine sonship by turning stones into bread.

In the calendar of the Christian year, we mark the first Sunday in Lent by re-hearing, remembering, and reflecting on, the story of Jesus' temptation in the wilderness. This is a story rich in visual imagery, scriptural allusions, and spiritual themes.

The chronology of the gospels locates Jesus' wilderness experience immediately after his baptism and prior to the beginning of his public ministry. Recall how the story of Jesus' baptism ended: "Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, 'You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.'"

This could have been a great moment for Jesus to begin his public ministry. There were large crowds gathered on the banks of the Jordan River, fresh from their own experiences of baptism, perhaps feeling cleansed, renewed, and open to new possibilities. Not everyone in the crowds would have seen the Holy Spirit descending upon Jesus in the form of a dove. But everyone would surely have heard the voice that came from heaven and said to Jesus, "You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased."

This voice that came from heaven could have been like thunder echoing through the Jordan River valley. Or it could have been like a tender and gentle voice, bespeaking a father's deep and abiding love for his son. But regardless of the sound of that voice, the words spoken by the voice clearly identified Jesus as the One called by God to inaugurate the reign of God. A captive audience, a voice from heaven, the Holy Spirit in visible form: what better setting for Jesus to proclaim his message about the nearness of the kingdom of God.

Except that's not what happens. The Spirit of God, instead of inspiring Jesus to begin speaking to expectant crowds, leads him away from the river and the crowds and into the wilderness. He will spend forty days in the wilderness, fasting and facing evil, wrestling with the potential consequences of his newly-proclaimed identity as God's Beloved Son.

Some years ago, a BBC television crew, on location in Israel to make a "life of Jesus" film, debated among themselves how to depict the appearance of Satan in the story of the testing in the wilderness. The crew decided "that the Devil's presence should be conveyed only by a [dark] shadow falling across the sand...just before the sun sinks below the horizon."¹

At the end of his forty-day fast, when he is famished and vulnerable, Jesus experiences the power and the presence of evil in a voice from the shadows as the sun is setting. The voice of Satan, God's adversary, takes hold of Jesus' baptismal identity as Son of God and seeks to lead him away from his true vocation as Servant of God.

"If you are the Son of God," whispers the voice, "turn this stone into bread." This shadowy voice, and we the disciples, assume that it is well within Jesus' power to perform precisely this kind of miracle, to use his divine sonship for his own self-fulfillment. Whether the voice from the shadows is mocking or seductive, its purpose is clear: to tempt Jesus to perform a manna-like miracle in the desert, and thus to confirm his divine powers.

(Later on in the Gospel, Jesus will indeed perform a manna-like miracle—the miracle of the multiplication of loaves and fishes—which is almost as unheard-of as turning stones into bread—to feed not himself, but his hungry followers.)

Jesus resists the voice from the shadows by recalling the scriptural narrative of Israel's wilderness experience (Deuteronomy 8:3): "It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.'" Though he is famished, Jesus remains faithful to God, trusting that God will provide him with whatever he needs.

Having failed to tempt Jesus to use his divine sonship to work a manna-like miracle in the wilderness, the voice from the shadows tests him with what we might call the most insidious seduction of all: the opportunity to supplant the Caesar and to rule over Caesar's empire, in fact over all the empires and kingdoms of the world.

This sounds like a stroke of genius on the part of Satan. What a great way to fully establish the empire of God on earth, with Jesus as the Divine Emperor. There's just one small catch: Jesus will have to sell his soul to Satan. Which he's not about to do. Once again, he vanquishes the voice with another scriptural quotation from Israel's wilderness experience (Deuteronomy 6:13): "For it is written, 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.'"

Having failed to lead Jesus astray in the first two temptations, the devil decides to throw Jesus a curve by quoting scripture back to him: "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from [the pinnacle of the temple], for it is

¹Malcolm Muggeridge, *Jesus: The Man Who Lives*; cited in Mark Link, *The Seventh Trumpet*, 55.

written, '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.'"

If Jesus were to yield to this temptation, and God were to send angels as a miraculous safety net, then Jesus by this "sensational demonstration"² would be able to claim priestly authority over the Temple. But Jesus parries this verbal test with another scriptural reference from Israel's wilderness narrative (Deuteronomy 6:16): "Again it is written, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'"

For those readers and hearers of the Gospel who were familiar with the Hebrew scriptures, Jesus' forty days in the wilderness would have recalled the Exodus story of Israel's forty years in the wilderness. The account of Jesus fasting for forty days and forty nights would have recalled the story of Moses fasting for the same amount of time on Mt. Sinai before receiving the Ten Commandments from God (Exodus 34:28).

Jesus thus appears in this narrative both as a prophet like Moses and as a person like the people of Israel. His baptism evokes Israel's passing through the waters of the Red Sea. His wilderness experience of hunger and temptation parallels Israel's experience of hunger and temptation in the wilderness. His proclamation of the good news is analogous to Israel's entry into the Promised Land. Just as it took Israel forty years in the wilderness to live into its identity as God's chosen people, similarly it takes Jesus forty days in the wilderness to live into his baptismal identity as God's chosen and beloved Son.

The desert wilderness is empty and lonely, harsh and foreboding, scorching hot during the day and freezing cold at night. So it's not surprising that the phrase "wilderness experience" becomes a metaphor for those times in our lives when we feel empty, lonely, unloved, hopeless. When we have done our best to place our full trust in God, and our faith has not been rewarded. When we are trying to figure out what God expects of us.

The wilderness is also a place of great beauty. Every once in a while, I find it necessary to leave behind the comforts of home and the lights of the city, and spend some time in whatever patch of semi-wilderness I can find, in the woods of Maine or the eastern Sierra of California or the Cape Cod National Seashore in early spring, to cleanse my soul and restore my spirit and be alert to traces of the presence of God.

In the geography of faith, the wilderness is a place of desolate beauty. In the journey of faith, the wilderness experience can be a time of emotional and spiritual desolation—but the wilderness experience can also be a time of inspiration, a time of unforeseen openness to the God who is there with us and there for us and even there within us.

The wise woman Jan Richardson reminds us "that when [Jesus] went into the desert, he went with the baptismal waters of the Jordan still clinging to him, and with the name Beloved ringing in his ears. How else to enter into the forty-day place that lay ahead of him? How else to cross into the wilderness where he

²Eugene Boring, *Matthew*, 164.

would have no food, no community, nothing that was familiar to him—and, to top it off, would have to wrestle with the devil? How else, but to go into that landscape with the knowledge of his own name: *Beloved*.³

Remember that this is also the name that God has for you: *Beloved*. As we enter the forty-day wilderness with Jesus during this season of Lent, may this name—*Beloved*--be ringing in our ears as well. May this spiritual landscape that lies before us, be a time of heightened openness to God's presence and guidance. May these days of desolate beauty lead us into an ever deeper awareness of our mission and our vision—of our God-given identity and vocation. May we together discern how God is calling us to be an even more genuine embodiment of the beloved community of the Beloved Son.

³<http://paintedprayerbook.com/2016/02/11/len-1-beloved-is-where-we-begin/>.