

SERMON
“Into the Wild”
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St. John’s Chapel UCC

Luke 4: 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.

Hear end the readings form Holy Scripture.

SERMON

Last Sunday we left Jesus on the mountaintop of transfiguration. There on the threshold of Lent we encountered the full exposure of Jesus' glory. We were allowed to see, with Peter, James, and John, the mystery of mysteries beyond our ability to explain or comprehend...even though we pastors stand up here each Sunday and try. And Chris, our music director, carefully selects music that fits with the message of the day. Vickie, our organist, picks and practices the moving renditions she play each Sunday. The choir practices and sings. The liturgists practice before their mirrors. Deb pulls together what I'm planning, Chris is planning and Vickie's planning, hoping we have all adequately communicated so that the many pieces weave a whole. Alice carefully edits the final draft. All of this happens in hopes that you may experience, if only for a split second, being surrounded by God's glory.

Now do not misunderstand! We do not do this just so you can have an experience of ecstasy that's better than sex. This is not just for your viewing and listening pleasure. We do this, or should I say God has us do this, so that you may be transformed by the glory of God **into who you were created to be.**

This Sunday, the lectionary does a flash-back to Jesus' temptation in the wilderness. In the wild he is tempted by the devil to **be someone he was not meant to be.** Remember, by the time we get to the transfiguration—Jesus has been filled with the wisdom, the power, and the glory of the Holy Spirit. The Transfiguration tells the story of Jesus exposing his glory, his holiness, the presence of God, with which he is filled to his followers.

Here today in the wild, the dove has already come, as did peace, and an affirmation of who he was; "You are my beloved and with you I am well pleased." Then the Spirit leads him into the wildness where for forty days he was tempted by the devil.

Why would the Spirit do that? And why would Jesus go without food for forty days in order to be tempted. The man who taught us to pray “lead us not into temptation,” lays the ground work on which the tempter will build. Why?

According to the Rev. Yvonne Delk, “The voice that said who he was did not send down from heaven a list of detailed instructions. It said merely that he was affirmed as a beloved son.” It did not outline the purpose of his life for the next thirty-six months.¹ The temptations that he fought with as a spirit-filled human gave him the specifics of who he was to be for God. In wrestling with the devil he discovered who **he was and wasn’t not meant to be. He uncovered his purpose and full identity.**

Once his temptation has ended, he travels eighty-five miles to Capernaum and turning to two friends says, “Follow me!”

The call to follow into the wild is different from a call to follow in the promise land. Following in the promise land is to bless and affirm what we see as signs of God’s reign—the things that fill us with glory and transform us. In the wild, we are asked to look at how easily we can get caught in the snares of culture’s understanding of power.

In the wild and wooly of life, we can become culture’s tool of conformity rather than Christ’s instrument of transformation. When we venture into the wild, we’d best be filled to the brim with a good dose of God’s wisdom in order to not let worldly powers make us someone we were never meant to be.

In the wild we can be taken away from who God created us to be. If we do not learn to say “NO!” to temptations, we will become someone we were not created to be. It is in the wild that our identity as God’s own is confirmed or denied.

¹ The Reverend Yvonne Delk, quoted in *Birthings and Blessings*, p.99.

So what are the specifics of Jesus' identity? What are the goals and directions he uncovers for himself and bids us to follow? The devil proposes to Jesus, "If you are the Son of God," *apparently the devil knows who Jesus is even before the world does*, "If you are the Son of God, then turn those stones to bread." Jesus refuses, in essence saying, "If I am the Son of God, I will not hunger after the security of my next meal, or the power of knowing I will never have to go hungry. For I have tasted the glory of God in my baptism, and I hunger for more. One does not live by bread alone."

Then the devil offers Jesus a career in politics.² He shows Jesus all the kingdoms of the world and says 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." You have got to pause here a moment and wonder about how the devil got control of all the governments of the world. The devil says they were given to him. Who gave the devil politics?

Did you not know the devil has the glory often found in politics? The wisdom of cunning and the power that destroys? To this type of power Jesus offers a resounding, "NO! Who do you think I am? I am God's very own—and it is the wisdom, power, and glory of God that I will honor—a glory that shines with the stardust of creation, a wisdom that conjures up images of paradise restored, and a power that empowers us to tap dance across the shadows you cast, old devil."

The great Mennonite theologian, John Howard Yoder, got into a debate with someone at a church meeting. Yoder had been arguing his "pacifism" and the other man was countering with his "just war" theory. Finally the man said, "Well, though we disagree, at least we are both trying to worship the same God. Right?"

Yoder replied quietly, "I don't think we are."

² William H. Willimon, p. 34

The first commandment says we are to serve, talk about, and attempt to understand, trust in, and be in a relationship with no other God. Fair enough! But in light of today's scripture, it would seem we need to be clear on which God that is—for there are far too many who go into the wild to worship the devil (the god of destruction) as if he were the God of Jesus.

A walk on the wild side demands we abandon our gods of arrogance, pride, nationality, class, culture, race, Protestant rule, in order to be **carriers of the one true God**. To follow Jesus into the wild, we abandon the nationally defined God of imperial triumphalism and confirm the covenanting God who freely chooses to enter a relationship with a people who are merely a band of slaves with no standing, no power, and no influence in the world. This true God, from whom Jesus gets his specifics by saying no to the devil, is defined by freely offering compassion to those, who by the world's definition, are the helpless, the oppressed, and the dispossessed. This God exists in the margins where the suffering is most severe and offers the power of hope, compassion and love. This God calls us away from privatized religion that leaves behind any memory of the cost of discipleship.³

Has the tempter visited you recently trying to entice you away from this God to whom Jesus pointed? Are there not voices inside your head that lure you? I think we probably have some awareness of them, don't we? They are the voices of our hungers, our longings, our dreams, our passions, our wounds, our wonderings, our fears, and our distrusts whispering to us, "if only I had enough power to change our husbands into who I want him to be." I don't tend to think in grandiose terms. I don't need the world groveling at my feet, but there are more than a few people that I would like the power to change.

The fear of being cast aside without even the "bare necessities of life," of wishing we could turn rocks into bread...few of us will ever have to face. And yet, we waddle in our fears

³ Rosemary Catalano Mitchell and Gail Anderson Ricciuti, *Birthings and Blessings*, p.100.

and our worries that tempt us to distrust our God. And oh the time we have wished for God to pull out God's bag of tricks to solve our problems—to send angels to keep us dashing our foot against a stone.

Holly Near, singer and songwriter, suggested at one of her concerts that we have sins that need conquering, but we won't conquer them deceiving ourselves that they're not there. Do you ever have trouble identifying your sins? You bow your head to confess your sins. You think about your week, and nothing comes to mind that you need to confess. Well, my friend. It's been too long since you've taken a walk in the wild—to listen clearly to where the devil is enticing you—and to learn clearly the difference between the call of false gods and the call of the One true God.

Jesus emerged from the wilderness strengthened. He walked from his walk into the wild filled with the power of the Spirit. There was no stopping him now. We need not fear entering the wild and giving ourselves an opportunity to rise above that which tempts us from becoming the strong images of God intended by our Creator.

As it usually does, Lent begins again with Jesus in the wilderness being tempted by the devil. The question is, will we join him to discover how to stop identity theft—to discover how to keep the devil from robbing us of the glory that is transforming us into who God created us to be (?)—or that diverts us from the purpose of our lives. Amen.