

Luke 4:1-13 Pastor Bill Uetricht 1 Lent 3/10/19

So where do you want to go today? Where do you want to travel? Florida, Aruba, Jamaica, oh I want to take you to Bermuda, Bahama, come on pretty mama, Key Largo, Montego? Where do you want to go? Some place really warm?

That's where we are taking you today. It's where we always take you at this time of the year. We're going today into the desert, generally a warm place, although often a bit cold early in the morning. The wilderness, the desert—it's where Lent initially leads. It's a part of the tradition. Israel went into the wilderness—40 years, we are told. Jesus went into the wilderness, 40 days. It's a part of the process, a necessary part of the journey.

Truthfully, many of us have spent much time in the wilderness. Barbara Brown Taylor describes the wilderness as maybe "looking like a hospital waiting room to you, or the sheets on a cheap motel bed after you got kicked out of your house, or maybe it looked like the parking lot where you couldn't find your car on the day you lost your job. It may even have been a kind of desert in the middle of your own chest, where you begged for a word from God and heard nothing but the wheezing bellows of your own breath."

We've been in the wilderness, and honestly, we didn't like it. Who would choose to go there? Not many of us. But Lent takes us there and invites us to be *intentional* about going there. On Wednesday night, I invited people into the discipline of Lent, into the desert. You don't really have to go there. I suppose you could avoid it, but the church throughout its history has taken people there. Part of the church these days isn't taking people there. Lent's a little depressing. There aren't too many peppy Lenten songs. So some portions of Christianity today just want to avoid the season. We'd rather sit on the beaches of the Caribbean, singing peppy Kenny Chesney songs, rather than being in the dark part of the corner bar, crooning Hank Williams' "tear in the beer songs."

But still, the tradition, the deep tradition, wants us to go into the wilderness. It really is necessary, not only for a deeper encounter with God, but also with the very real demonic forces, and ultimately, with ourselves. Tested people often are deeper people. Folks who hang out in the desert

often are honed, refined, by the refiner's fire. They are sharpened people. They tend to be less reactive, perhaps less anxious, and maybe even less angry.

Traditionally, the trip into the desert has been about deprivation, giving up, letting go. It's the right move, it seems to me, although I do appreciate those who see the season as a time to take on something: take on service to others, take on generosity, take on advocacy for the vulnerable, take on new and life-giving habits. But there is something good and right about deprivation, about giving up something. Let's face it. We live in a world that tells us that we can have it all and tries to give it all to us. We can have candy whenever we want it. We can have the buffet whenever we want it. We can have the world at our fingertips whenever we want it. And sometimes those things mean a lot less to us because we never experience not having them. Fireballs would mean a whole lot more to me if I only had them once in a while. And the same is true for meat. Wow, what a treat! Now it's almost an entitlement! Having it all leads to entitlement, a significant problem in our own era. Giving up things sometimes gets us more in touch with the giftedness of it all.

In many ways, Jesus' experience in the wilderness was about deprivation. The devil wants to give Jesus a loaf of bread, or more accurately, wants Jesus to do a little magic and turn a stone into bread, so that he can break his fast. But Jesus won't give in. His life is not going to be dominated by food. His life ultimately won't be about economics. It also will not be about political power, something Jesus makes quite clear as he responds to the devil's lies about the devil having the ability to hand the ruled world over to Jesus, giving up the temporary high that the thought of securing that power provides: "It is written," he says, "Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him." Life is bigger than some kind of high. Often it is in the desert that you reach this kind of conclusion.

Jesus also deprives himself of religious power and the religious "wow-factor" when he won't give into the devil's temptation to throw himself off of the temple. His life will not be defined by the spectacular, the miraculous, or even the power mongers in Jerusalem.

Jesus gave up a lot for Lent. It's what the tested ones do. They are led to a higher calling that cannot be controlled by the demands of the self or

the culture. They know that sometimes you have to let go, give up what is so tempting to hold on to. I love what Barbara Brown Taylor says about giving up things for Lent:

I know people who give up using their cell phones for Lent. Can you imagine? I know other people who give up watching television or shopping or eating while they are standing up. Of course, none of these things would impress people who have spent their whole lives trying to figure out where the next meal is coming from, but in a culture of plenty I am impressed with anyone who decides to make it without anesthesia for a while--to give up whatever appliances or habits or substances they use to keep themselves from feeling what it really feels like to live the kind of lives they are living.

Anesthesia! What a marvelous image! So much is used in our lives to dull our senses, to prevent us from feeling deeply, and in particular, feeling deeply the pain. Taylor says that we use so much in our lives to “plug the hole,” the deep hole within ourselves. My wife has often described our cell phones as “pacifiers” for people. They plug the hole. Don’t know what to do? Don’t want to face a few moments of quiet? Plug the hole. Bring out the pacifier. The phone will carry you through.

We all have pacifiers. We all long to plug the hole. Truthfully, what we choose to use as the pacifier is probably different for each one of us. For some of us it’s the phone. For some of us it’s the computer, Facebook, Instagram, video games. Fill the hole! For some of us it’s alcohol. We drink to fill a hole. For some of us it’s food. Those who are working with folks on weight issues will often speak of “emotional eating.” We eat to fill a hole. I know I do. I eat more on Sunday afternoon because I am in a bit of a withdrawal stage. People are gone. The high of preaching and teaching is gone. Fill the hole.

I also know that for me one of my great pacifiers is people and activity. I love being with people. I love being busy. I always have. I fill the hole with busyness and connection. Now admittedly, those things are good things. And we have to get this: the most significant temptations we have in life are not with bad things, but with good things. Food is good. Sex is good. Power

can be good. Religion is good. Phones are good. Facebook is good. Connection is good. Activity is good. But those good things can sometimes become too important. Pretty soon you are preoccupied with them. I know that is true for me with connection and activity. They try to plug a hole, and I am left not going to the deeper places, the quiet places where I have to face myself, my own demons, and ultimately God.

I have noted in my life that I do much better work, feel more joyous about life when I spend some time alone—alone with myself, books, the devil, and yes, God. I am better when I go to the wilderness. The church must know something quite significant, or why else would we be taken there purposefully for 40 days every year?

Do you know what happens in Luke's story right before the temptation narrative? Jesus is baptized, when the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove, and when a voice from heaven speaks these words to him: "You are my Son, the beloved. With you, I am well pleased."

Full of the Holy Spirit, full with the love that God has for his children, Jesus headed off into the wilderness. Before he went there, he discovered who he is. He got to know who establishes his identity. He was and is the beloved Son of God. That's the given for him. That's the bottom line. That is the starting point. That's who he is when push comes to shove. He's got a place. He has a status. He has worth. To go into the wilderness is ultimately to have all the stuff torn away from us that we use to bolster ourselves, to prove ourselves, to plug the holes that we have because we are afraid that ultimately we are not enough. But our baptisms tell us something very different. They tell us who we are at the bottom of it all.

We are not our politics. We are not our religion. We are not our power or our lack thereof. We are not who other people say we are or aren't. We are not worth something because people on Facebook tell us that they like us or like what we have to say. Our lives don't have meaning because we are surrounded by people or are busier than everybody else. Ultimately, the hole doesn't need to be filled by us. Who we are when everything is stripped away is a beloved child of God. This truth is what fills the hole.

Now this is about where I was in the writing of my sermon when I was thrown into a wilderness that I had no desire to go into, a desert that was

not of my own choosing. This is where I was when I got the word that our former intern pastor Alex Anklan was on a ventilator and would probably die soon. This was no wilderness that I, you, Erica, his family, the church he had just started to serve, should have had to enter. This was not the intentional wilderness of Lent, but the miserable wilderness of real life. I don't think that this is a wilderness that I have something to learn from, that will take you or me to the deeper places, at least initially. But this I trust: what we discover to be true for you and me when we are in the wilderness of Lent is true for Alex. Who he is is a beloved child of God, and nothing, even death, can take that away.

Man, do I wish that Alex didn't have to take the final wilderness journey! Man, do I wish that he could be taking a community of faith into the intentional wilderness journey that Lent is. But my wishing doesn't change the reality. May God receive him into the arms of his mercy! And may we who have the privilege to go once again into the intentional Lenten wilderness be led to the place where we discover who we really are—stripped down, vulnerable, dying creatures, heading to the same wilderness that is Alex's. But we do so, with him, trusting the One who makes us his own, calls us "beloved."