

## **In the Wilderness**

January 17, 2021

Bendersville and Wenksville United Methodist Churches

### **Matthew 4:1-11**

Have you ever noticed, when reading the gospels, that each gospel feels very different than the others? Mark, for example, is the shortest gospel, and it is all about the immediacy and the “right now-ness” of what God was doing. In fact, I sometimes joke that Mark kinda reads a little bit like an essay that was written the night before it was due – it’s just one big rush to get to the end, and then the ending itself feels hastily slapped on at the last minute. John’s big emphasis was on the kingdom of God breaking into this world in the person of Jesus, and so we see John making a much bigger deal over things like miracles and supernatural events than the other gospel writers. In Luke’s gospel, everything points toward Jerusalem and Jesus’s whole life and journey is one that draws him closer and closer to that last, central, pivotal week when Jesus died and rose again.

Right now, though, we are hanging out for several weeks in Matthew’s gospel. And one of Matthew’s big focus points is on tradition and the Jewish story out of which Jesus comes. Of all of the gospel writers, Matthew is the one that quotes or alludes to the Old Testament the most. For Matthew, establishing that Jesus is the fulfillment of God’s ongoing work is of paramount importance.

And we see that in today’s story. From the very first words. To lay the context a little bit, Jesus has just been baptized. He’s come up out of the waters and God has declared that Jesus is God’s son, the beloved. God has claimed Jesus as his own. Established his identity and his purpose and his whole reason for being.

And then, in the very next breath, Matthew tells us that Jesus is led by the same Spirit of God that just descended upon him in his baptism, this same Spirit leads Jesus into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. And in this wilderness, Jesus spends 40 days.

Now, right off the bat the reader – and remember, the earliest readers would have been folks who were *very* familiar with the Hebrew scriptures – the earliest reader’s minds are going to be transported in time back to another foundational story, centuries earlier, when the people of Israel are brought through the waters and into the wilderness, where they spend not 40 days, but 40 years. For the ancient Israelite people, the miracle at the Red Sea, when God parted the waters and led the Israelites across on dry land, and then the waters swallowed up the Egyptian armies that had come to re-enslave the Israelites – this whole story sort-of functioned almost like a baptism of sorts for the Israelites. God’s way of saying “I am here, and I am protecting you, and I am not going to

leave you. I am your God, and you are my people, and there is nothing that is going to change that.”

And then in the wilderness, the people of Israel learn what that means. The wilderness is the place where the people come face-to-face with themselves. They learn about their vulnerabilities and temptations. They are brought face-to-face with their deepest fears. They are forced to let go of the need to control the narrative. They learn about surrender. And trust.

And it is hard. Really, *really* hard. The things that the Israelites learn throughout these 40 years in “wilderness boot camp” are things that basically go against everything that we naturally strive for as human beings living in a fallen world. They wanted structure. They wanted security. They wanted clarity about what comes next. They wanted to plan for tomorrow – make sure they have enough food to last them at least a few days in case there isn’t enough tomorrow. They wanted to be able to follow a god they could “see” – which is why they constructed a golden calf. They wanted their leader to have a game plan.

And they got none of this. Instead, what they got was 40 years of practice “going it afraid.” Not knowing where their food was going to come from, but learning to trust that God would feed them. Not being able to see God, but discovering that the God who they could not see was right there with them at all times. Knowing that Moses had absolutely no clue what in the world he was doing, but also knowing that God did. And God had chosen Moses to lead anyway. Not knowing when they would ever be able to leave the wilderness and enter the Promised Land, but still putting one foot in front of the next, in front of the next, trusting that when the time was right, God would reveal it to them.

40 years of wilderness. 40 years of formation. 40 years to discover what it means to be called a child of God. A people of God. Beloved of God.

So this is the story that would have been in the backs of the minds of the earliest readers of Matthew’s gospel. Jesus comes up out of the waters. God smiles upon him. “This is my son. Beloved.” And then, where does the Spirit lead Jesus? Into the wilderness. Where Jesus himself is brought face-to-face with himself. Where he discovers his own vulnerabilities, and fears, and temptations.

Fears and temptations that look very similar to mine, and to yours, and to those of the Israelites. He spends 40 days fasting, and he is hungry. “Turn these stones into bread,” the devil tells him. “God gave the Israelites bread, and made water flow from a rock. If you are God’s son, surely you have the power to make your own life easier. Why should you have to deal with such trivial things as hunger and thirst? You are bigger than that. More important than that. Hunger is so pedestrian. A thing for mortals. ‘Those people.’

You're not 'those people,' Jesus. You are bigger and better than them. Save yourself the worry and the hassle! You know you can!"

And then, the devil takes Jesus to the top of the temple and tells him, "Throw yourself down, Jesus! You know that if you do, God will save you. And then, think of what everybody else will think! EVERYONE will know, then, that you are God's son. NOBODY will doubt you! Think of the influence that you would have, if everybody witnessed God swooping in to save you! Heck, if somebody catches it on their smartphone and posts it to Youtube or Instagram, you'd be an instant sensation! You'd go viral! Think how much easier it would be then to get your message across! *(Okay, maybe I'm a couple thousand years ahead of myself, but if smartphones and social media had been a thing back then, I'm sure the devil would have used them).*

I think it is also really important here to note that the devil is bringing out the big guns here – he quotes scripture at Jesus. Uses scripture to justify his words, to justify Jesus giving into temptation. Let this be a warning to all of us, that just because we can find Bible verses to support whatever our perspective or our opinion might be, does not necessarily mean that we are following God's call upon our lives. The Bible can be used as a source of light and life and truth as it was intended, but it can also be used as a weapon and it can bring deep and lasting harm when misused. My mom is somebody who almost entirely walked away from faith altogether, because of one family member who used the Bible as a battering ram against her. And I am going to leave this here right now before I get on a soapbox that I can't get off of. But let me just say, if we find ourselves using scripture to bolster our own opinions or perspectives, we are probably at least a little bit off-base. Because more often than not, scripture actually challenges our assumptions and surprises us and moves us to someplace different from where we started. Otherwise, we would have no need for it.

And then, finally, the devil takes Jesus to the top of a mountain, with a view extending as far as the eye could see. The whole city of Jerusalem and the surrounding area was there. I'm sure, if Jesus squinted his eyes, he could see tiny little dots moving around – people far below, going about their business, just trying to get through their day. The disciples he had yet to call, the tax collectors he had yet to party with, the religious leaders he had yet to fight with; the countless nameless people whose lives would intersect with his own over the next three years until those same nameless people would turn on him in the end. Friends and adversaries; Jews and Samaritans; the sick and the hurting and the curious and the broken.

"It is all yours, Jesus," the devil tells him. "Every last bit of it. The town, the people, the countryside. It's the one thing you want more than anything else. For the people to do what you ask them to do. For them to see what you want them to see. For them to know and recognize what you know to be true. And you can have that. Complete control. Over everyone and everything. No fights with the Pharisees – one snap of your

fingers, and they will “get it.” No need to die three years from now – the authorities and the guards and the crowds and even the high priest and the king himself – all in your pocket. All you have to do is turn from God and serve me instead. I can give you *exactly* what you long for the most.”

I told you the wilderness is hard. It was hard for the Israelites; it was hard for Jesus; and it is hard for us.

And yet, as hard as it is, the wilderness is a place where the Spirit of God leads every single one of us. It is a critical part of our journey of faith. A place of discovery. The wilderness is that space in life where God has called us, God has claimed us, God has marked us as God’s children; God has redeemed us. God has saved us. God has washed us clean. God has given us a new identity and a new purpose. And then now, in the wilderness, God begins the hard work of teaching us what exactly that means.

And in the wilderness we discover that following Christ, following the Spirit of God, means setting aside some of the things that we have come to rely on. It means that no longer do we get to trust solely in ourselves. No longer is life all about “pulling ourselves up by our own bootstraps” and this sort-of “rugged individualism” that our society has taught us to value. In the wilderness we discover that it is not about what *we* can do, or how well we can stand on our own two feet, but it is all about what God is doing in and through us. And sometimes that means recognizing our own limitations – recognizing what we *can’t* do, so that we can see the boundless, limitless expanse of what God *can* do.

In the wilderness we learn that security doesn’t come from gathering extra manna for the next week, or from turning stones to bread because we are hungry. It doesn’t come from storing up for ourselves a year’s supply of toilet paper and Clorox wipes and coffee and ammunition because we are afraid that there may be a run on these things tomorrow and we have to prepare and protect ourselves. In the wilderness our security comes *only* from knowing that the God who we cannot see, sees *us*. And the God who knows what we need, provides us *just* with what we need for right now, and no more. And tomorrow, God will be here too, to take care of us tomorrow.

In the wilderness we begin to gain some clarity about what it is that we long for the most. The Israelites longed for the Promised Land – a place that they could call their own. Jesus longed for God’s people to see their hearts and lives transformed by the presence of God among them. And you and I probably all have slightly different longings. And as the wilderness journey goes on (and on...and on...), sometimes we might find ourselves wishing we could take shortcuts to get there (“*You can have it all right now Jesus, if only you will do this one little thing of abandoning who you are to follow me.*”) But the truth is, there is no shortcut through the wilderness. And the only way to truly find our deepest longings fulfilled is to do the hard work of allowing

ourselves to be formed and shaped and molded and crafted by God into a people worthy of the calling that we have received.

Friends, I don't think it's much of a stretch to say that we are all living through a kind of wilderness right now. Between a pandemic that we are tired of and grieving because of; major losses that we have faced in this last year – job losses; the loss of a sense of connection; the loss of people who have passed away whether through COVID or other disease; in many cases the loss of the ability to say good-bye to loved ones in the ways that we would have liked. A loss of routine and tradition and some of those creature comforts that we had come to rely on. Add to all of that a tremendous political unrest and social issues that are now staring right in our faces and a sense of fear that is gripping the nation right now. If this is not a wilderness, I don't know what is. It is hard. It is really, *really* hard. And without exception, every single one of us has been affected.

That's the bad news. But here's the good news: As hard as it is; as painful as it can be; as disorienting and frustrating and aggravating and exasperating and angering as it sometimes is, the wilderness is also a place of formation and growth. As we come to the end of our rope; as we reach the end of our strength; as we lose our sense of direction; as we discover that we are hungry and scared and longing for something else – that is where our reliance upon the grace and the presence and the power and the endless beauty of God starts. It is when we just don't *know* anymore that we discover the freedom to let go of our need to control – and we can relinquish it all into the hands of God. And in that moment, we begin to discover who God has *truly* called us to be.