

## **Sermon: Into the Wilderness**

2/21/2021

Let us pray. May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

For the last few weeks, every night after putting Tyler to bed I have been getting on the treadmill, turning on a movie or a television show, and walking. This pandemic has been stressful for all of us, and part of the way in which I have been dealing with my stress is by sitting on the couch, watching television, and eating snacks. Night after night, I would tell myself that I could resist. That tonight I will only have some chips or a small bowl of ice cream, only to find that I was still hungry and still eating. You see, I just couldn't resist the temptation, and my guess is that I would still be eating snacks late at night if I went and sat on the couch and watched a show after working out. But after I cool down and take a shower, what I find is that it's time for bed, and it's hard to snack when you're sleeping.

Our Gospel lesson for today, on this first Sunday of Lent, also deals with temptation. It is the story of Jesus' temptation, of the forty days and nights that he spent praying and fasting in the wilderness, after having been driven there by the Spirit. Forty days and nights, a number that would not have been lost on Jesus or his fellow Jews. For forty years, we are told, the Israelites wandered in the wilderness. For forty days and nights, Noah waited aboard the Ark as the rains came down outside. For forty days and nights, Elijah fasted and prayed while walking to Mount Horeb, where he heard the voice of God pass by. And Moses, the other prophet who appeared next to Jesus during last week's Gospel lesson? For forty days and nights he was with God atop Mount Sinai, before coming down with the Ten Commandments—or if you are a Charlton Heston fan, the Twenty Commandments. Forty might not be a significant number for us, but it

was for Jesus, for Jews, and for early Christians. Forty was a number which they would not have taken lightly.

The significance of Jesus being driven into the wilderness would not have been lost on them either. As the Israelites had learned the hard way, the wilderness does not have the resources to sustain life. It is the place where we are the most vulnerable, which is probably why God sent them there as punishment. In the wilderness, the Israelites were forced to depend entirely upon God, and not simply so that they might find their next drink of water or their next bite of food. The wilderness is lonely, a feeling we have felt all-too-well this past year, and as some of us have probably learned, loneliness is a recipe for wandering. When we are lonely, we are more likely to feel sorry for ourselves, to look for comfort and friendship in places we shouldn't go, and to feel abandoned by God, by our family, and by our friends. Feeling alone and unloved makes us vulnerable, and it is at just that moment that the devil steps in to prey on our weaknesses.

Take the temptation of Jesus, for example. In it, we hear that the devil did not approach Jesus as he entered the wilderness. Rather, the devil waited for forty long, hot days, until Jesus's stomach was empty and his mouth was parched. This was when Jesus should have been his loneliest and most vulnerable. When he should have seen the ice cream in the freezer or chips in the cabinet and been unable to resist. This moment was when the devil approached Jesus and offered him what his stomach had been yearning for all that time, food. "Satisfy yourself," he told Jesus. "Turn these stones into bread. Ever since your baptism, people have been calling you the Beloved Son of God. Why not prove it by doing something that only God can do, something that will ensure your survival?" But Jesus would not give in to the temptation, for he knew that God and God alone can truly sustain us and give us life.

And so, after failing to tempt Jesus with food, the devil led Jesus to the highest point of the Temple in Jerusalem and dared him to jump. “You and I both know Psalm 91,” the devil said to Jesus, “the one that says that God will command God’s angels to guard the Lord and bear him up, so that he will not dash his foot against a stone. Jump and prove that the Psalm is true. Jump and prove to everyone that you are the Lord, or are you afraid?” The devil hoped that by appealing to Scripture he could tempt Jesus to seek power, glory, and fame for himself, a humble reminder that quoting from the Bible does not prove that a person is following God’s will. But Jesus once more refused to give in to temptation, for he knew that we must trust completely in God and God alone.

Finally, the devil took Jesus to a high mountain and showed him the kingdoms of the world. “You can rule over all of them,” he told Jesus, “all you need to do is fall down and worship me.” The pages of human history are littered with people seeking worldly power—from the Roman emperors ruling over Israel that day to the politicians currently leading our country—and Jesus surely must have been tempted. After all, we’ve all experienced temptation, from Adam and Eve in the Garden to you and me worshipping here today. It’s a part of being human and Jesus was fully human. But unlike you and me, unlike me when I see that box of Girl Scout cookies in the cabinet that arrived just the other day, Jesus never gave in. Jesus heard the devil’s sweet, seductive words that day and rather than fall down and worship him, Jesus declared that you can only have one master and that he serves God and God alone. Only then did the devil depart and God’s angels come to care for him, fulfilling God’s promise to guard and bear up the Lord.

As Christians, we believe that the Holy Spirit is present and active in our lives, filling our hearts with God’s love and giving us the strength to follow God’s call. What we often overlook

is that it is this same Spirit that drove Jesus into the wilderness. If not for the Spirit, Jesus would have almost certainly spent those forty days and nights beginning his ministry, as we read in the passage following today's Gospel lesson, rather than living among wild beasts and being tempted by the devil. But before Jesus could follow God's call, he needed to endure temptation and to demonstrate that he had placed his faith in God and God alone. The same is true for us worshipping here today. When we claim Jesus as Lord, when we accept the Spirit into our hearts and lives, we are asking God to send us into the wilderness. We are telling God that we long to place our faith in God and God alone, and that we are prepared to face our own temptations to prove it.

For each of us, the wilderness will be different. Personally, I struggle with depression. There are times when I become so consumed by sadness that I want to separate myself from the world, including those closest to me. During these times, I descend into a wilderness deep inside myself, a wilderness in which I have questioned God and where God is leading me; a wilderness which I experience more often than I care to admit and from which I sometimes struggle to escape. I don't know what your wilderness is, if it's a place you left many years ago, if it could come back at any moment, or if you're still there right now. What I do know is that God will never abandon us there. During those forty days and nights, the Spirit remained with Jesus, giving him the strength and courage to resist the devil's temptations. And when Jesus was ready, the Spirit led him out so that he might fulfill his call to proclaim the good news and to help transform this world into a new creation.

Every year, we read the story of Jesus' temptation on the first Sunday of Lent. In part, we do so as a reminder that Jesus was also tempted by money, power, fame, and selfishness. That Jesus understands just how alluring these temptations can be and that experiencing them is part

of being human and living in this fallen, imperfect world. We also read the story of Jesus' temptation as a reminder that we too have been called to go into the wilderness. If we truly desire to serve God and God alone, then we need to face the temptations in our lives. We need to demonstrate through our thoughts and actions that we are willing to repent, to accept God's grace, and to seek to live anew. For me, that doesn't mean that I will no longer struggle with depression. There will still be times when I become depressed and want to shut myself off from the world. But God has helped me better cope with my feelings, open myself to others, and acknowledge when I can't do it on my own. And finally, we read the story of Jesus' temptation as a reminder that we are not just being called to follow the Spirit out of the wilderness. We are being called to take part in Jesus' ministry. We are being called to emerge from the wilderness and find ways, even in these unexpected times, to proclaim the good news and to help transform this world. It won't be easy. Then again, neither were the forty days and nights that Jesus spent in the wilderness.

During this season of Lent, may God give each of us the strength and courage to follow Jesus, both into the wilderness and beyond. Amen.