

SCRIPTURE TEXT: Luke 4:1-11

SERMON TITLE: “Jesus’ Wilderness Journey”

Transforming Journeys is the theme of our sermon series during Lent. Today, we follow Jesus on transforming journey into the wilderness.

Our text is Luke 4:1-13. Jesus has been baptized by John in the Jordan River. While Jesus was praying, heaven opened up, 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.*

Luke then presents a genealogy of Jesus that traces his lineage all the way back to Adam—who is also identified as a son of God. So we have the first creation in Adam and a new creation in Jesus. Now for the text; listen for the word of God. **READ SCRIPTURE.**

Now let me see if I have this straight: Jesus was baptized. The Spirit descended upon him as he prayed. A voice came from heaven: *You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.* Jesus was full of the Holy Spirit—and the Spirit led him where? The wilderness? What’s up with this? A party would have been more appropriate, don’t you think?

But no, it’s the wilderness. In the first century, people familiar with Palestine would have thought of the Judean wilderness called Jeshimmon, which means *The Devastation*.¹ Literally and metaphorically, the wilderness is a lonely place devoid of human companionship—an empty place—a dry place—a threatening place. And in terms of Luke’s story, it’s not just the wilderness—it’s forty days in the wilderness—it’s forty days in the wilderness without food. So what’s the point?

Well, the point is—testing. The wilderness is a place of profound testing—or temptation if you will. The Spirit led Jesus into the wilderness to be tested. Barbara Brown Taylor calls this

¹ Barclay, William. "The Gospel of Luke." *The Gospel of Luke*. Philadelphia: Westminster, 1975. 43. Print.

*The Wilderness Exam.*²

Does any of this sound familiar? As I recall, the children of Israel were tested in the wilderness of Sinai for 40 years. And it was God who led them into the wilderness. They too were hungry.

So this testing of Jesus in the wilderness was no accident—it was intentional. Jesus didn't take a wrong turn at the Jordan River and wind up lost in the desert. No, the Spirit led Jesus into the wilderness for this testing so that Jesus could sort out what it meant for him to be God's Son, the Beloved.

And for this to happen, Jesus had to experience what life was like in a place of desolation with no comfort except for God. So Jesus embraced this wilderness journey; he even intensified it by fasting to the point of becoming *famished*. Mary Gordon writes: *Famished: you can feel it in the cave behind your ribs, in the midribs empty drum. Jesus was in a state of depletion, an almost dangerous, desperate state.*³ In other words, Jesus made himself vulnerable for the test.

Now the text says that Jesus *was tempted by the devil*. I think it's a mistake to imagine a visible, external being in conversation with Jesus. What's happening to Jesus in this story is an internal struggle. In the words of Kate Huey, this test comes *from deep within Jesus himself*. She says that it might be better *to imagine a seductive voice offering very "good" things to Jesus, an attractive strategic plan for his ministry*⁴—a strategic plan I might add, complete with scriptural justifications. The devil—that seductive voice from deep within—offered him more

² "The Rev. Barbara Brown Taylor - The Wilderness Exam - Lent 1 - Day1.org." *Sermons, Preaching and Christian Community | Welcome to Day1*. Web. 16 Mar. 2010. <http://day1.org/1756-the_wilderness_exam>.

³ Quoted in Huey, Kate. "Sermon Seeds." *United Church of Christ*. 21 Feb. 2010. Web. 16 Mar. 2010. <<http://www.ucc.org/worship/samuel/>>.

⁴ Huey, Kate. "Sermon Seeds." *United Church of Christ*. 21 Feb. 2010. Web. 16 Mar. 2010. <<http://www.ucc.org/worship/samuel/>>.

bread, more power, more protection.

But Jesus responds to that *seductive voice* with a *no* each and every time—*no to the bread, no to the kingdoms, no to the angelic body guards*. Jesus passes his *wilderness exam* by saying *yes* to God and God alone.⁵ To do good for the wrong reasons is not good enough for Jesus.

So on this wilderness journey, Jesus is transformed inwardly. He sorts out from the competing forces in his own soul what it means for him to be God's Son, the Beloved.

So I wonder: When was the last time the Spirit led us into the wilderness—that place of devastation with no comfort except for God—to wrestle with what it means for us to be baptized—to be God's children—the followers of Jesus Christ—the bearers of the Holy Spirit? Over the 40 days of Lent, we're invited to take this transforming journey into the wilderness—wherever that *wilderness place* might be for us.

For me, I sense the Spirit nudging me toward the wilderness because you see, having been baptized as an infant and now at 57 years of age, I'm still discovering what it means to be a baptized follower of Jesus Christ. So the *wilderness* journey I'm planning to take during this Lenten season is a 72-hour retreat on the streets of Austin with no food, water, telephone, credit cards, or cash. The retreat is sponsored by Mobile Loaves and Fishes. It begins at 5 p.m. on Palm Sunday, March 28, and concludes at 2 p.m. on the Wednesday of Holy Week, March 31.

Am I anxious about living on the street for 72-hours? Yeah, I am. Do I expect to be tested? Yeah I do, because I have such conflicted feelings about the kind of response that the reality of homeless people in the city demands of me as a baptized follower of Jesus Christ. But the Spirit is urging me to engage the struggle—to confront my anxiety—to make myself

⁵ "The Rev. Barbara Brown Taylor - The Wilderness Exam - Lent 1 - Day1.org." *Sermons, Preaching and Christian Community | Welcome to Day1*. Web. 16 Mar. 2010. <http://day1.org/1756-the_wilderness_exam>.

vulnerable—and then see what happens.

By the way, if you would like to make this wilderness journey as well, I've placed a flyer on the information table in the foyer. It's titled: MLF Street Retreat.

So if the Spirit is not nudging you to a wilderness journey on the streets of Austin, what will your wilderness journey be this Lent? What is that desolate place for you in which there is no comfort except for God? How will you continue to sort through what it means to be baptized—to be claimed a child of God—a follower of Jesus Christ—a bearer of the Holy Spirit? How will you be vulnerable? How are you being tested? What kind of transformation is in store for you?

I give you a moment of silence to ponder the questions.