

Sermon: “The Wilderness Path”*

Deuteronomy 26: 1–11; Psalm 91: 1–2, 9–16; Luke 4: 1–13

St. James Presbyterian Church
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The Rev. Dr. Kay S. Diviney

It is sometimes said that, for the ancient Israelites, this morning’s Old Testament reading stood as a kind of a creed. Saying it affirmed who God was for them. And it affirmed for them who they were as the people of God. It was their identity. But if for the ancient Israelites, descendants of Abraham, Jacob, and Joseph, this passage expresses a creed, it is a creed not in the form of a set of tenets or propositions or statements that called for some kind of assent or agreement. No: it was a *story*. As theologian Stanley Hauerwas would say, “it is a story we know about God” — a story to be told and retold, by fathers to daughters and mothers to sons, again and again, year after year, down the many centuries. They were obligated to tell this story, but telling it and hearing it engaged people; their ears pricked up as they gathered around, and then they could say: “yes, yes, this is who God is to us. This is who we are, who I am. We are who we are because of this story. We *know* who we are because of this story”:

A wandering Aramean was our ancestor; he went down into Egypt and lived there as a stranger. The Lord heard us when we cried out; the Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm. For forty years we followed a wilderness path. Then the Lord brought us into this rich land, where we have made our home. Each year, we remember. We offer the first fruits of this land back to God and we celebrate, all of us. We share with the whole people that are in this land, rich and poor, high and humble, even strangers and aliens, that all of us might know how we are blessed.

This story both summarized and renewed the faith for the ancient Israelites. It recalled for them who they were and whose they were. It reminded them where they placed their trust.

Our Christian creed — the Apostles’ Creed that we will say together in a little while as we gather to the Lord’s table — is also a story. We might have missed this because it is a bit buried, but it is there: it lays out who Jesus is for Christian people by the events in his life. It is just a brief summary, but each point opens up in our memories. He was born, we hear (and then we remember the

* This sermon text is provided to assist listeners with hearing or language difficulties, as well as others who are interested. It is not intended as a fully-documented publication — and it may differ from the sermon as preached.

Advent and Christmas story); he suffered and died (and we remembered all that he went through in his life, all of the opposition, leading finally to the cross); he rose again from the dead (and here we both remember and look forward to the Easter celebration to come); he is now with God (and empowers his people, drawing them to himself as disciples, drawing them into his ways, and offering them a peace and a hope that passes all understanding). We are shaped and formed by this story. It is our identity.

For us, too, this story both summarizes and renews our faith. It helps us to recall who we are and whose we are. It reminds us where it is that we place *our* trust.

Today, on the First Sunday *in* Lent, we listen to another part of the story of Jesus. We can imagine how it might appear in a fuller version of the Apostles' Creed: he was born, he was baptized, he went out into the wilderness, he was tempted. We learn from this story what it means for Jesus to be the Son of God, and it shows us *how* he will be the Son of God, wandering into the wilderness of our world.

The devil's plan is to pull Jesus away from his mission in the world. He first appears when Jesus is vulnerable — famished after his forty-day fast. I have never fasted for forty days nor known the pain of that kind of hunger. But I do know that Jesus' hunger is a sign that he really has entered fully into the human condition. He really is "all in." To change stones into bread in order to alleviate his very human hunger would be to step back from his mission, which is founded on Jesus' willingness to live our lives as we live them. But Jesus chooses not to misuse his power to save himself pain. He chooses to stay with us even in extremity. He remains "all in."

The second temptation recognizes that Jesus has entered into the human world as a political non-entity, as a mere carpenter's son many strata beneath the notice of the great and powerful, and far from being able to influence them for evil or for good. The devil tempts Jesus to earthly success and political power. He promises glory, of a very worldly sort. But Jesus does not confuse earthly kingdoms with the kingdom of heaven that he has been sent to proclaim. He chooses not to escape from the arduous and wandering pathway that awaits him, but stays true to his purpose. Only in this way can the blind regain their sight, can the captives go free.

The first temptation challenged Jesus in his incarnation, by which he lives our bodily human life with us. The second temptation challenged Jesus' commitment to his mission to proclaim the kingdom of God. The third temptation

might be the one that hooked the devil himself. In John Milton's great poem *Paradise Lost*, Lucifer is the brightest of angels, but also the most vainglorious. He challenges the Most High to combat, and is tossed out of Heaven into Hell. He would rather rule in Hell, he says, than serve in Heaven — and begins to plan for just such a temptation as this one. That's Milton's version of things, and it helps us to see the nature of the challenge here. It is for Jesus to display himself in all of his power and glory. It is an appeal to Jesus' pride. But Jesus masters even his own pride. He refuses to set his own will up against that of God. He refuses to become like a god for the people. A Jesus willing to summon angels to rescue him from death would not be a Jesus capable of going on our behalf all the way to the cross. Yet again, Jesus remains true to God's purposes.

Over and over again, Jesus is tempted "by the devil . . . to become other than the Son of God he is created to be."¹ All three temptations invite Jesus to show his power in palpable ways — first in the material and economic sphere, then in the political, and then in the religious. And they remind us of things in the past — the hungry Israelites in the wilderness; the worship of the golden calf — and things in the future — Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane, saying in prayer, "Not my will but yours be done" (22:42).

Or, to put things differently: the wilderness path shows who Jesus is. He is the one who is willing to expose himself to the pains of human life. He is the one who proclaims the kingdom not of human beings but of God. He is the one who is willing to go all the way to the cross for us. He is the one who, even amid the toils, sorrows, and agonies of life, trusts in God.

Today, with this reading, and the meal we are about to share, we begin our Lenten journey. For this Lent, perhaps rather than giving up chocolate, or, as I heard one person say, giving up giving up chocolate, we can try to remember, as we go about the challenges and pleasures of our lives, our Lord who is faithful. For Jesus Christ has already worked out our salvation in his very body, entering into the pain of our life, resisting those who would divert him from his path, and in humility working out God's purposes for us.

He walks with us on our own wilderness journeys. Thanks be to God.

Amen.

¹ Alan P. Sherouse, *Feasting on the Word: Luke*.