

“Wilderness”

Rehab series. 1st Sunday in Lent

Matthew 4:1-17

What is the most remote place you have ever visited? A few years ago, my family and I spent several days visiting Joshua Tree National Park in the Mojave Desert. We never journeyed more than a few hours away from our car, but we were still deep in the heart of sparse, unpopulated areas, with only some birds, jack rabbits, and a few lizards. We had to be careful each day to pack enough water and food to last, to bring maps, and know where we were going. The wilderness is beautiful, but it is also dangerous. The whole point of entering the wilderness is to leave civilization behind to experience something new, to come away with a new perspective.

On this, the first Sunday in Lent, I am inviting you into a type of wilderness experience. We are calling this sermon series “Rehab.”¹ You see, Lent is like spiritual training for the Christian. It is a time when we can enter a spiritual wilderness, removing excess from our lives and training ourselves in spiritual practices.

No one enters the wilderness easily. It is a lot like recovering from surgery. Both my father and my younger brother had surgeries this past week, my brother on his foot and my dad on his shoulder. Each of them faces a wilderness of recovery, several months of rebuilding muscles and tendons to regain their full health.

No one goes through rehab easily. If you have ever had to do physical therapy, you know it takes commitment, resolve, and belief in better days ahead

¹ Credit to <https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/worship/lent-2018-worship-planning-series> for the resources and ideas for this series.

to overcome the pain and hardship. You have to change your routine. You have to give up certain habits and start new ones. You have to change your diet and your exercise patterns. You have to believe in a greater purpose – getting healthy – in order to complete it.

Jesus had his own physical and spiritual therapy in the Judean Desert. Have you ever gone into the wilderness just to “get away from it all”? Being away from distractions can help us get to the center of our thoughts and emotions. Being in the desert for forty days seems to have brought Jesus clarity of mind, which I find astounding. Jesus fasted for forty days, and I certainly don’t think clearly on an empty stomach.

The point of this scripture is not so much to show that Jesus was morally superior to the devil as it is to show that Jesus was who he said he was. Notice, the first two times Satan tests Jesus, he begins with the phrase, “If you are the Son of God.” The devil was tempting Jesus to prove himself by various displays of power, which is ironic, because both the devil and Jesus knew the truth.

So let’s look at the three wilderness tests. First, the devil tempts Jesus to turn stones into bread to satisfy Christ’s hunger. What was this test about? It is a test of Christ’s priorities. The devil was targeting the human nature of Jesus. We all get hungry. But Jesus could actually use his power to do something about it. Colossians 1 tells us that all things were created for Christ and through Christ. He made the soil, the sun, the rain, and the seed that is needed to produce bread. In hunger and weakness, Jesus is tempted to abuse his power. But Jesus responds, “One does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.” Jesus fights temptation with memorized scripture. Take note, church. Jesus resists instant gratification, because he is the Son of God. The Son of God is

not impulsive; he is patient. Later, at an opportune time, Jesus uses his power to feed the 5,000, in a manner that appropriately gives honor to God.

The second test is a test of trust. "Throw yourself down from the temple." In this second temptation, the devil is attacking the heart of the relationship of Jesus and the Father. Does Jesus trust God to save him? As Christians who know our Bibles, we find this temptation also ironic, because later in his life, Jesus will lay down his life. But not here, not now. Jesus does not die recklessly. Jesus dies with a purpose.

During the second test, the devil quotes scripture to Jesus. He actually throws a psalm in Jesus' face. Isn't that interesting, that even the devil distorts scripture for his own purposes? This should be the second lesson for us: when reading our Bibles, context is critical. Jesus is not fooled. He responds with another scripture: "Do not put the Lord your God to the test."

Finally, the devil made Jesus an offer. He took Jesus to a high mountain and told him, "Everything you see, I'll give you, if you bow down and worship me." What is this test really about? The devil knew that all the kingdoms of the world rightfully belonged to Jesus anyway. What the devil was tempting Jesus with, was to take the easy way out. Take a short cut. Don't go to the cross. I'll give up without a fight, if you worship me.

Note, this last time Jesus actually sends the devil away. As the devil has escalated the temptations, now Jesus responds with anger and passion. "Go away, devil!" Do you know that James 4:7 says if we resist the devil, he will flee? Jesus knew that.

So what happens when Jesus resists all these temptations? What happens when he completes his forty days? Matthew 4:17 says, "From that time on Jesus

began to preach, ‘Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.’” The parallel account in Luke 4 (verse 14) says, “Jesus returned to Galilee in the power of the Spirit.” The point of his wilderness journey was to come out with the power of the Spirit. He proved he was the Son of God, and with the power of the Spirit, he could now do the very miracles the devil had tempted him with, but to do them for the glory of God.

The take away for us is this: we all have a wilderness. The writers of this Lenten series suggest that “the wilderness represents those times in our lives when we begin to face, head on, our own brokenness.”² I know there are times I have been out in the desert. From the time I graduated from college, I changed careers, lived in two different countries, and fought depression for almost two years. I have lost my job, questioned my calling, and worried that I was not following God’s plan. I spent time in counseling, read my Bible, and had many sleepless nights and tears when I wrestled with the wilderness in my soul. But when I came out of that wilderness, I felt God’s Spirit more closely than ever.

This wilderness, this journey through Lent, is a form of rehab for Christians. Whether or not we are literally dealing with addictions or illness, all of our souls need rehab. We need spiritual exercise, activity that probably goes against our first nature. How often do you pray and fast? How often do you give up something easy and instantly satisfying in order to experience deeper growth? The point of this forty-day “program” is not just to complete it. Sure, if you want to give up chocolate for Lent, go ahead, but the real purpose of Lent is to establish new habits that last, that build up our faith.

² <https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/worship/lent-2018-worship-planning-series/february-18-2018-wilderness-first-sunday-in-lent/first-sunday-in-lent-2018-preaching-notes>

Historically, Lent served two purposes – it was a time of preparation for new Christians who would be baptized, and it was a time to restore those who had left the church. In a very serious manner, Lent was for screening those who would be followers of Christ. Today, Lent is very much a test for all of us, not just those seeking membership and baptism. It is a time of penitence, fasting, and self-inspection. A time of meditation on scripture and being open and honest before God. It is a time to read Psalm 139 and say, “Search me, God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me... (verses 23-24)

In rehab, you can't take the easy way out. It only works if you stick to the program. We cannot journey through Lent without going into the wilderness of our souls. We must get away from excess; go to places that are deserted, untamed, unknown, and disorienting. Why? Because anxiety causes change. Comfort does not.

Are you willing to go into the desert of your soul? Jesus will go with you. If you are too comfortable, maybe you should let the Spirit drive you to a new and unfamiliar place. Comfort will not make disciples of Christ. Commitment will.

The world is very broken. My heart aches for all those who have suffered tragedies, including those in Florida. Talk about being in the desert of life! But I wonder, if more of us took this challenge seriously, to fast and pray and walk with Jesus, how many more people could we reach? How many families, troubled youth, souls that are dry and broken, would we engage if we spent more time asking God to show us how walking through our deserts can empower us to help others?

My prayer is that we enter the wilderness this Lent. I pray that we will examine ourselves and confess our sin. I pray we will take the time to reconcile, to have those awkward, uncomfortable, but necessary conversations. I know, rehab is uncomfortable. It means stretching muscles that are atrophied, changing eating habits, refusing to go to certain places where we are tempted. But Jesus didn't have to go into the desert. He chose to go, to set the example for us. He chose to obey the Spirit, and it was uncomfortable, but it was worth it.

In closing, I want us to reflect on these words from the Apostle Paul in 1st Timothy 4:7-10: “...Train yourself to be godly. For physical training is of some value, but godliness has value for all things... That is why we labor and strive, because we have put our hope in the living God, who is the Savior of all people, and especially of those who believe.” Amen.

Prayers of the People

We are in the wilderness.

As much as we have tried to map, domesticate, and routinize every inch of our planet and every moment of our lives, we know our maps do not tell us where we are with you, O God, and our schedules often serve to distract us from the reality that we ourselves and so many of our neighbors on this planet are in the wilderness, too.

And so we pray:

Here, in this wilderness, prepare your way, O God.

With all persons kept in poverty or slavery,
all who are in fear from abusers, terrorists, and oppressors,

all who face addiction of any kind,
and all who are targeted for unjust treatment because of who they are;

Here, in this wilderness, prepare your way, O God.

With leaders in religious, political, economic, and social life;

with our families, friends, and neighbors;

and with all who work to sustain and protect our lives

as military, civilian workers, and first responders;

Here, in this wilderness, prepare your way, O God.

With all who need your healing power,

and with all who offer healing through their skill and presence;

with all who have harmed us,

and all whom we have harmed by our action or inaction;

Silence

Here, in this wilderness, prepare your way, O God.

Pastor:

Receive the prayers of your people, most merciful God.

In your compassion, forgive our sins, and free us for lives of joyful obedience
through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.**

Silence

Pastor: In the name of Jesus, you are forgiven.

People: **In the name of Jesus, you are forgiven.**

All: Glory to God! Amen!