

1st Sunday in Lent (Year A)

Matthew 4:1-11

Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. He fasted for forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished. The tempter came and said to him, 'If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread.' But he answered, 'It is written, "One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God." '

Then the devil took him to the holy city and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, 'If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down; for it is written, "He will command his angels concerning you", and "On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone." ' Jesus said to him, 'Again it is written, "Do not put the Lord your God to the test." '

Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor; and he said to him, 'All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me.' Jesus said to him, 'Away with you, Satan! for it is written, "Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him." ' Then the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him.

Welcome to Lent, my friends: the sacred space between the dust of Ash Wednesday at the alleluias of Easter. Lent is forty days of the tension between death and life, between fear and hope, between sin and salvation. Another word for that tension is wilderness.

The word "wilderness" literally means "the state of the wild." This is not ordinary time. No, the wilderness of Lent is many things, but ordinary is not one of them. Here, we walk with the Israelites through the desert, having escaped the servitude of Egypt through the baptismal waters of the Red Sea. Here, we journey with Abraham and Sarah as they wander in pursuit of God's promise to bless them with children. Here, we traverse the trails of scarcity and self-reflection as we are trained for the coming of the Resurrection.

Ah, that glorious Resurrection? The colors. The flowers. The Easter dresses. The seer-sucker and bow ties. The Easter dinners. The choirs and the alleluias. The sanctuary filled to the brim.

But first...wilderness.

The liturgical calendar refuses to allow us to skip to the glamorous parts. Lent is like a forty-day gestational period when we journey through the messiness of pregnancy, with all of its joys and struggles, its challenges and blessings, forced to wait until creation is ready to burst forth from the womb.

And today's story is definitely *not* glamorous. Our first stop in the wilderness is the story of Jesus' temptation by the devil. Now, many of us know this story well: the devil tempts Jesus three different times, and each time Jesus' response and rebuttal is grounded in scripture. After thwarting the devil three times, the devil leaves frustrated as the angels of God attend to Jesus in his exhaustion.

But today I'd like to rewind just a little bit and focus on what happened immediately before today's passage. Immediately before today's passage is the baptism of Jesus, when he is submerged in the waters of the River Jordan by John the Baptist and the heavens open up and God proclaims that this is God's beloved son and we should listen to him.

It's a remarkable, beautiful, glamorous moment. It's not unlike the wondrous beauty of the Transfiguration that we journeyed through last week. Like Peter, we might be tempted to stay up on the mountain, or by the baptismal waters of the River Jordan. We might be tempted to linger there for a while because, after all, it's such a serene scene. It's not messy; it's miraculous. It's not scary; it's scenic.

But the Gospel of Matthew will not afford us to get comfortable. Immediately after Jesus' baptism, Jesus is led into the wilderness. Actually, that's not really a fair description because the original Greek in which today's story was written gives us a verb that is much more physical. Truthfully, Jesus wasn't really "led" into the wilderness; he was *driven* into it. From the waters to the wilderness, Jesus is rather forcefully snatched from his baptism into the temptation in the wilderness after forty long days of fasting.

From the water to wilderness. Liturgically speaking, that is *exactly* where we find ourselves today. We've spent the season of Epiphany unwrapping the gifts that Jesus brings us in his incarnation. But now, we're in the wilderness. We've gone into the woods and who knows what lessons we will learn in the wild.

Well, there are at least two wilderness lessons that today's passage teaches us.

The first is this: Jesus is in the arena with us.

As we enter the wilderness, it is important to remember that we do not journey through it alone. Jesus doesn't bid us farewell as we go into the woods and promise to meet us safely on the other side. No, Jesus goes with us into the wilderness as a friend, as a companion who knows what it's like to be in the arena with us.

Many of you know that I'm a big fan of Brené Brown. If you haven't read any of her books, I highly recommend them. She's a New York Times bestselling author who focuses on courage, shame, and vulnerability. And she uses this metaphor of "the arena" frequently in her writings; it's actually a metaphor that she borrows from a quote by Theodore Roosevelt. For Brené Brown, the arena is the place where we are vulnerable, the place where we take risks and leave the safety of the sidelines. The arena is where we stop pretending that we are invincible and take a step into the unknown. Think about the story of the disciple Peter stepping out of the boat on to the water in the storm. The moment Peter steps out of the boat, he's in the arena. The other eleven disciples are safely on the sidelines.

Brené Brown makes the case that she only accepts feedback from other persons who are in the arena with her. She does not give attention to the feedback of the people who are not taking risks and are sitting safely on the sidelines while she is out there getting her butt kicked. In other words, if the disciples on the boat were to have begun ridiculing Peter for sinking in the water, Peter should not give the disciples any attention but only accept the feedback of Jesus who *is* out in the wild water with him.

This is the good news of today's passage and indeed the good news of the entirety of the season of Lent: Jesus isn't sitting safely on the sidelines while we're "out there" getting our butts kicked; Jesus is right here in the arena with us. We don't worship a savior who is immune to the temptations of the world. We don't worship

a savior who remains at a safe distance from the powers of evil that surround us. We don't worship a savior who doesn't know what it's like to be frail and famished, lost and lonely.

And that gives me comfort. And I hope it gives you comfort as well.

So if the first wilderness lesson is that Jesus is in the arena with us, then...

The second wilderness lesson is this: Jesus resists temptation by remaining grounded in his identity as a child of God.

To each of the temptations, Jesus responds with Scripture - scripture that reminds him of who he is and *whose* he is.

When the devil tempts him with turning stones into bread, Jesus remembers his identity as a child of God and tells the devil: "I don't get my daily bread from you. I get my daily bread from God."

When the devil tempts him with testing God's providence, Jesus remembers his identity as a child of God and tells the devil: "I trust in God to care for me, so I don't need to play your games."

And when the devil tempts him with idolatry, Jesus remembers his identity as a child of God and tells the devil: "You are not the recipient of my trust and devotion; God and God alone gets that from me."

Jesus is grounded in his identity as a child of God because he has come straight into the wilderness from the waters of his baptism. In those waters, the heavens opened up and God said to Jesus, "*You are my beloved child. In you I find joy!*" Indeed, our baptisms are the moment when God says that to *each* of us. Beloved children of God - that is our supreme identity that comes before any others. And *that's* the truth we must cling to if we are to tackle temptation in our lives in whatever forms it comes to us.

In this place, you are told that you are a beloved child of God. But out there in the world there are many voices that try to tell you otherwise. But the good news is that Jesus is right there with us. When you think about it, the identity of Jesus is being obscured very much right now. There is no shortage of people who have coopted the name of Jesus to do some really horrific things. But Jesus will have none of that. Jesus knows who he is. And he serves as a model for the rest of us who are in the arena of the wilderness, being tested and tried and trained for resurrection.

I'd like to close with a quote from Debie Thomas in an article she wrote a few years ago on today's passage. She says the following: "*At his baptism, Jesus heard the absolute truth about who he was. That was the easy part. The much harder part came in the wilderness, when he had to face down every vicious assault on that truth. When the memory of his Father's voice from heaven faded, and he had to learn how to be God's beloved in a lonely wasteland. Maybe we, like Jesus, need long stints in the wilderness to learn what it really means to be God's beloved. Because the unnerving fact is: we can be beloved and uncomfortable at the same time. We can be beloved and unsafe at the same time. In the wilderness, the love that survives is flinty, not soft. Salvific, not sentimental. Learning to trust it takes time.*"

Friends, as we depart on this wilderness journey, let us remember, first, that Jesus is in the arena with us. Secondly, let us never forget that Lent is a time to solidify our identities as children of God. Let us come to the Lord's Table to be reminded of that identity as we continue our Lenten journey.

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In the name of God the Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer, may all of us, God's children, say: **Amen.**