



## 40 People/40 Days

First Sunday in Lent  
March 6, 2022

Ascension Lutheran Church  
Pastor Chris

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus, the Christ. Amen.

If you follow me on Facebook, you will know that I do not post a ton of stuff for people to read. I try to be funny. I post prayers that move me. And occasionally I post about my legally-sanctioned obsession with caffeine usually revolving around a small-time coffee shop named Starbucks. So why would anyone imagine that I would begin a sermon about Jesus being in the wilderness with a story about my favorite Starbucks location which is anything but a wilderness to me. I know the route – the baristas – and the drinks – along with the number of seats by heart. Yet last Thursday, I went into the newly remodeled café to pick up my Venti Vanilla Sweet Cream Cold Brew with extra ice and extra sweet cream and found myself completely shocked at the experience. I walked in and greeted one of my favorite baristas by name. She took my order. I paid with the Starbucks App on my cell phone using 150 stars to get a free drink. I waited and they called my name. I picked up the drink and it looked different. The barista looked at me and said – Oh, whoops, I put the order in wrong – try it and see if you like it. Well, I am always up for a free drink. I picked up the drink and put it to my lips only to have the lid on the cup pop off and my venti vanilla sweet cream cold brew with extra ice and vanilla sweet cream foam went all down my face, my jacket, my pants, and into my shoes. I mean – SHOCK! My drink! What a waste! So cold! Mercy! And the eyes of the barista grew as big as saucers.

In this day and age – many would lose their minds – start yelling – get angry. I just started laughing after the initial chill of the ice bath wore off. What are you going to do? And after several apologies from the staff behind the counter – I was cleaned up enough to leave. They fixed my drink and I told them it was no big deal. But...But...But! People! Hello! Where is my free drink coupon for all the trouble? One lousy free drink for the vanilla sweet cream cold brew coffee bath I endured with a smile on my face and a hearty laugh. Free drink? No. Nada. Nothing! Oh Starbucks, you mesmerizing mermaid who sings her siren song and lures me in and leaves me with nothing but the drink I paid for. What just happened?! This is not the Starbucks I know or remember – this is a harsher world where free drinks are harder to come by if they exist at all. Welcome to my wilderness moment last Thursday. I know, I know my wilderness moment is not so terrible and barely qualifies as wilderness. Perhaps our wilderness moments are not always death-defying, life-changing, catastrophes that cause us to lose all sense of direction while we desperately try to figure out which way to go. Sometimes the wilderness is the place where we learn something new about ourselves and seek a guiding light to move us in a new direction.

For Jesus today, the wilderness is a place of testing by the devil no less. “Since you’re God’s Son, command this stone to turn into a loaf of bread.”<sup>4</sup> Jesus answered by quoting Deuteronomy: “It takes more than bread to really live.” Now remember Jesus has not eaten for more than 5 weeks. I do not know about you, but get me through about 2:30 in the afternoon with nothing to eat and I am ready to devour the second shelf of our refrigerator at home. Jesus uses the words of Scripture to content with the devil’s testing. It does not hurt that Jesus was present when the words of Deuteronomy were written. He knows the words as well as he knows that the devil is going to offer bread for his hunger. The words of Scripture are Jesus’ guide.

<sup>5-7</sup> For the second test the devil led him up and spread out all the kingdoms of the earth on display at once. Then the Devil said, “They’re yours in all their splendor to serve your pleasure. I’m in charge of them all and can turn them over to whomever I wish. Worship me and they’re yours, the whole works.”<sup>8</sup> Jesus refused, again backing his refusal with Deuteronomy: “Worship the Lord your God and only the Lord your God. Serve him with absolute single-heartedness.” We can get so easily distracted in the wilderness. Like the dog named Dug in the animated movie UP (remember the old man, the house lifted up by balloons). The dog with the collar that translates the dog’s barking into speaking. The old man grieves the loss of his wife and he meets a



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dog and the dog starts talking with the old man and then the dog sees a squirrel and gets completely distracted in the middle of his sentence. The dog starts out: "I am a good dog. Will you be my master? My master is squirrel!" And after the squirrel is gone, then the dog returns to his conversation. That tends to be us A LOT! Walking down one road – following the light God lays before us and then finding a chocolate river, a fast-talking stranger, or a Starbucks and then we leave the lighted path for the road we think will take care of our need in the moment. The light on the path keeps us focused – but when we leave the path – the wilderness begins to overwhelm. The light on the path is Jesus' guide.

<sup>9-11</sup> For the third test the Devil took him to Jerusalem and put him on top of the Temple. He said, "If you are God's Son, jump. It's written, isn't it, that 'he has placed you in the care of angels to protect you; they will catch you; you won't so much as stub your toe on a stone?'" <sup>12</sup> "Yes," said Jesus, "and it's also written, 'Don't you dare tempt the Lord your God.'" In the wilderness, when we are trying to decide which way to go – we start asking for a sign. God just light up the sky. Should I take the new job? Should I stay and work on this relationship? Should I forgive her? Should I trust him? How much longer should I wait? Just give me a sign. And again, his trust in God is the guide Jesus follows.

How about you? In your wilderness moments, whom do you trust? In your wilderness moments, where do you see the light? In your wilderness moments, whose words do you follow?

Forty days – Forty people. Anybody know what I am talking about? Hallelujah! At least six of you read my newsletter article for March. Throughout the season of Lent – this is your chance. To offer an intentional moment of reaching out to tell someone they are important to you. And then feel the power of God's love in your own life as you are reminded of the gifts God gives to us each and every day in the people who love us and make our lives that much richer. Like the children's sermon this morning...not everything in the wilderness must be scary or cause you pain. Sometimes the wilderness is where we learn to trust, to depend on those God places into our lives to bring us hope; to give us joy; to point us toward home.

I have known many wilderness moments in my life. And as I reflect, I can see where God sent someone to guide me along the way.

In the wilderness of straight C's across the board in all of my science classes in my freshman year of college – ummm, I do not think God is calling me to be a doctor? Well now what? God sent my home church pastor to guide me.

In the wilderness of preparing to interview for the call here at Ascension? Is it time? Is this where God is calling me to serve? God sent my wife's advice into my ears.

In the wilderness of raising my first of three junior high students? Will they ever learn common sense? Will the little boy I loved return later on after the hormones have finished coursing through his veins? Will I survive the daughter in junior high now? And will the third child put me over the edge of my sanity when she enters junior high? God sent several of you and countless parents before you to give advice and nod in understanding.

In the wilderness of the death of a student on a church retreat? When I was so lost that I could not imagine a future with you or any community of faith as pastor ever again? God sent so many of you to hug me and tell me it was going to be alright even when I could not believe it could be alright ever again.

In the wilderness of walking onto Main St. the night of the Christmas parade and trying to figure out what exactly God was asking me to do as everyone seemed to have a job except me. I could not bind up wounds or move the injured or organize their transport. What good could I do that night to help the injured laying on the ground? God sent a first responder who looked at my jacket with the words Police Chaplain



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stitched on the pocket who told me to stay where I was. The injured would be brought to where I was standing.

In the wilderness of a once-in-a-hundred-years pandemic. Hello – what does the church do now? When it is dangerous to be with anyone? How to be pastor? How to give hope? How to be present in the lives of the people God has called me to love when I cannot see them face-to-face? God sent Pastor Tony and Edwin and Vicki and Brenda and Amy and Tamie and Ben and Sarah to help guide the direction of caring for this community of faith even as we could not be together in-person.

We know wilderness. We know wilderness for a moment and some of us feel like we have known wilderness for a lifetime. And yet, through it all God is present with us whether we know it or not. God is present in the Bible we read; the light we see; the trust we hold onto. God is present. More often than not, God is present in those whom God sends to walk alongside us. The ones who cross our path and show up for a time to help us to trust – to bring us hope – to give us joy – to point us towards home.

Forty days - forty people. And don't worry if you have not started - the five Sundays in Lent do not count. So even if you start today – you are right on schedule to send a text message, write a Facebook message, pick up a phone, mail a letter. Who are the people in your life who have brought you hope in a moment of fear? Who are the people in your life who have turned your sorrow to joy for an hour or a day? Who in your life has pointed you back to God – pointed you toward home? Now is the time to reach out and tell them. Forty days – forty people. Who is on your list?

I am going back to Starbucks on Monday. Not to argue for my free drink but thank them for the laugh and the sermon story that started us out today. Sorrow into joy. Ice cold coffee into a warm moment of friendship. And maybe, just maybe – a free drink in the wilderness as I make my way home. Thanks be to God! Amen.