



Sunday February 26, 2023
Matthew 4:1-11 (First Sunday in Lent)

Ascension Lutheran Church
Pastor Tony Acompanado

On Friday morning I went out for an early run on one of my favorite trails. A few miles in there's a split in the trail where you can choose from two different paths. The first one, which I almost always choose, begins with a long, steep hill that leads deeper into the forest followed by several more rolling hills. The second one is a flat, open prairie with unlimited sun exposure and spectacular views for miles. Before I go any further let me take a moment to share that over the past few weeks I've been tending to several family, friends, and church members who have been struggling through a series of wilderness ups and downs – each one more challenging than the next. From surgeries and difficult diagnoses, to relationship struggles, financial difficulties, and emotional and mental health breakdowns, while also trying to also make sense of their spirituality and purpose. It's been a lot. That said, most of you also know that I love running in the forest because it's where I go to escape – the place where I go to pray and gain perspective and peace. But after the difficulty of the past few weeks as I stood at that fork in the trail and looked up at that first hill I thought to myself...no way, not today. So instead I opted for the wide-open prairie and let me tell you – it was wonderful. The air was cool and invigorating. The sun was warm and comforting. And for a few miles after everything was great...until it wasn't. I eventually came to a spot where the unobstructed sun had begun to do what it does to snow and ice – so I crossed carefully, when suddenly the ice gave way, and I was now standing knee deep in icy cold water. But not to worry, I exited quickly and continued my run. Until I came to another crossing. However, this time I attempted to skirt the edge as much as possible looking for the most frozen spot and just as I was about to reach the safety of the fully frozen other side the ice decided it was time to shift causing me to lose my balance and fall onto the center of the ice – ice that had thinned enough to allow my once mostly dry body to now be soaked by a few inches of...you guessed it...icy cold water. I got back up and finished my run, but sadly the rest of my time wasn't spent enjoying the peaceful scenery, instead, I ruminated with regret about my decision to leave my usual path in favor of the one that tempted me with something easier.

It's inevitable that Lent comes to us around this same time each year, but for many of us, it feels less like a birthday and more like a flu shot. We know that Lent is necessary – that it's good for us in much the same way a vaccination might be. But the truth is – nothing about Lent feels natural or exciting no matter how many sermons we hear about how it makes the joy of Easter possible. “Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return.” Familiar words that mark the beginning of the Lenten season inviting us to step into a wilderness journey and acknowledge with a cross made of ash that our humanity is limited, and that our bodies will fail us no matter how creatively we attempt to preserve them with medicine, exercise, cosmetics, or meditation. And so it's from that humble beginning that we venture into the wilderness like Elijah, like Moses, like the Israelites after their exodus from Egypt – and like Jesus. With ash on our foreheads and mortality on our minds, we embark on an inward journey of discovery. It's a hard concept to explain to our friends who aren't Christian, because, truthfully, we don't even completely understand it ourselves. I'd even argue that for many of us, we have the tendency to engage in the practices of Lent without ever considering why we're doing what we're doing. We simply do it because that's what we're supposed to do or that's what we've always done.

Lent is supposed to be a time of formation – a time to reflect on one's identity as a follower of Jesus and to figure out exactly what that means. We might give up chocolate, alcohol, or junk food. We may limit our unnecessary spending, or decrease our TV or social media consumption, and if we're really brave, or insane, some of us may even attempt to stop drinking soda or coffee for forty days. And we'll do it all to suggest that we're better prepared for the Resurrection. To an outsider, it looks and sounds like nothing more than a ridiculous diet. The goal is to sit with our hungers, our wants, our desires – and learn what they have to teach us. What is the hunger beneath the hunger? Can we hunger and still live? Desire and still flourish. Lack and still live generously. And when we're starved for whatever it is that we're longing for – friendship, meaning, intimacy, wholeness, well-being, financial stability, a family – then we ponder who is and where is God in the midst of it all. But if we don't have a good explanation for our Lenten behavior – if we don't seem to fully understand the focus of the season, it's not completely our fault. Afterall, it's Jesus' own stopover in the wilderness that inspires this unusual season, and unfortunately for us, Jesus doesn't seem willing to offer a clear explanation for what he's doing. So, year after year when the first Sunday of Lent arrives, we watch as Jesus wanders off into the wilderness again as the Son of God confronts the fullness of his humanity.

So I wonder if a little refresher would be helpful to us. The people of God have been waiting impatiently for a Savior; and although there were some rumors awhile back about a birth in Bethlehem, no one has really seen any evidence that anything has changed in the world. Then one day, out of the blue, on the banks of the Jordan River, Jesus shows up, seemingly out of nowhere. He's come to be baptized, although it feels more like a coronation. It's glorious. The Spirit descends on him like a dove; God speaks from on high; it's all good stuff – the kind of event that almost makes up for centuries of expectation. It's the sort of positive event you might follow up with a reception or a press conference to let everyone know the hope they've been waiting for has finally arrived. That is, unless you're Jesus. If you're Jesus, you do none of these things. If you're Jesus, you show up out of nowhere and then immediately move on – to nowhere. The common understanding is that he goes to the wilderness after his baptism to prepare for what's to come. Like Moses, Elijah and other spiritual leaders before him, Jesus has to spend some time alone with God before he can carry out his mission. And anyone who's ever read the Old Testament knows that it takes at least forty days before you can hear what God has to say. But unlike all those others who spent time in the wilderness, Jesus doesn't come here to listen to God – at least that doesn't appear to be his primary purpose. He's already heard God loud and clear at his baptism. The gospels all agree that this spiritual detour wasn't his idea at all – Jesus is led into the middle of nowhere by none other than the Holy Spirit. And Jesus isn't led into the wilderness to hear God more clearly, he's led into the wilderness to hear from divine enemy number one.



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But here's what I find most amazing...even though Jesus didn't choose this path, he stayed until the work of the wilderness was over. You and I don't always choose the wilderness either. We don't volunteer for pain, struggle, loss, or fear – but the wilderness happens anyway. Whether it comes to us in a hospital waiting room, a difficult relationship, a troubled child, a sudden death, or a crippling panic attack, the wilderness appears, uninvited and unwelcome. And can we just ponder this for a moment – sometimes it's God's own Spirit who leads us into these wilderness moments. But does this mean that God wills bad things to happen to us? That God wants us to suffer? I don't think so. Does it mean that God can redeem even the most difficult periods of our lives, if we choose to stay and pay attention? Does it mean that our wilderness moments can become holy places even as they remain challenging? Yes! Yes! The good news for us is that Lent didn't come naturally to Jesus either. It took the leading of the Spirit to get him there. So, if it's not to develop a deeper connection with God, why does the Spirit lead him into the wilderness? Because Jesus must go there to face temptation. And all four gospels agree that he was, in fact, tempted. And this means that temptations work, and it makes it all the more understandable why Jesus taught his disciples to always pray "Lead us not into temptation." One of the most powerful messages the life of Jesus leaves us with is that no one is exempt from the power of the tempter, not even the best of us – and in this case, especially not the best of us. We're all vulnerable to temptation, even though what tempts each of us may be look quite different.

The devil taunts Jesus with temptations masked in the most noble of intentions – these are truly temptations worthy of the Son of God. They prey on his goodness, and they tell us something about Jesus' own heart. None of these things sound particularly self-destructive on the surface, but they're exactly what temptation looks like for Jesus and for all of us – "Take care of yourself." "Save the world." "Prove your faith" – the voice of evil sounds an awful lot like the voice of good. Our cultural assumptions about temptation generally assume that it's describing the irresistible urge to do something that we already know will destroy us, the kind of stuff that we'd rather keep at arm's length. The kind of temptation that looks like temptation from the get-go. An alcoholic raiding the hotel mini bar. A lonely spouse spending too much time with an attentive co-worker. Stuff we know is wrong, but we're drawn to regardless.

Temptation comes to us in moments when we look at others and feel insecure about not having enough. Temptation comes in judgments we make about strangers or friends who make choices we don't understand. Temptation rules us, making us able to look away from those in need and live our lives unaffected by poverty, hunger, and disease. Temptation rages in moments when we allow our temper to define our lives or when addiction to wealth, power, influence over others, arrogance, or a need for control defines who we are. Temptation wins when we engage in the justification of little lies, a racist joke, a questionable business practice for the greater good, or the criticism of a friend or loved one when they aren't around. Temptation gets the best of us when we get so caught up in all of life's distractions that we lose sight of life itself. Even the most faithful of us will wrestle with these obvious forms of self-destruction, but the goal of this season is to help us recognize the temptations that don't look like temptation until we see them in the rearview mirror. The temptations that are the most dangerous are the ones that sound most like good – the ones that sound the most like God. Jesus has every good quality – he has character, integrity, faith, and a moral compass that's unmatched – and yet, even he is tempted. The solution to temptation then isn't moral strength or depth of character. When we try to make ourselves religious enough, mature enough, or moral enough to be exempt from temptation, it's only a matter of time before we give into it. But our temptations won't be the hotel mini bar kind. They'll be played out on the road paved with good intentions. When we're led by our own wisdom, when we're led by our own desires, when we're tempted to take shortcuts to get there, we'll always find ourselves vulnerable; and the greater our moral character, the more creatively disguised we'll find the temptation. The only answer to temptation then, is obedience. Jesus' escape from the tempter isn't a matter of weighing pros and cons and making the best decision; it's a deliberate choice to submit to God – again, and again, and again. "Life is more than eating bread," Jesus whispers, though his rumbling stomach disagrees. "Worship God and nothing else," he says, even though the world's kingdoms and all the power is right there for the taking. "Don't test God," teaches the one who will be tested even up until his death.

Which brings me back to our time in the wilderness – this mysterious season of self-denial and other things that don't come naturally. Lent is about obedience. Reliance. Dependence. It's about the awareness that every good door that opens is not necessarily the will of God. It's about learning to be led into the wilderness places within us where our hungers, our dreams, and our fears all take turns trying to shut out the voice of God. The voice that says, "you are my beloved." In just a few weeks, we'll follow Jesus to a garden where, for a brief moment, his own desires will conflict with the path that he's been called to take. Jesus will pray, "Father, if you are willing to take this cup from me," but his prayer will not end there, because it is his obedience that will carry him, "yet not what I want, but what you want." Lent doesn't come naturally, even to the best of us. But that's exactly why Lent is our only hope. If we can learn to recognize the voice of the tempter here in these forty days of self-denial, then maybe we'll be wise enough to recognize him when he speaks with our own voice. In the wilderness of this holy season, what does Jesus' temptation story mean for us as we begin our own Lenten journeys this year?

Maybe it means we need to have enough faith to follow Jesus into the wilderness instead of looking for an easier way around it. Perhaps it's time to hear evil's voice, recognize its allure, and confess its appeal. Because if we're courageous enough to stand face to face with temptation while trusting in the one who was tempted as we are and knows our struggles first hand. Then we might also find strength and hope while discovering who we are by reclaiming those we are. Thanks be to God. Amen!