

Today begins a new 7-week preaching series called *From Wilderness to Glory*. Today also is the first Sunday in Lent, and Lent lasts for 40 days, which mirrors Jesus' 40 days in the wilderness. Jesus' experience in the wilderness echoes Moses' time at Mount Sinai when Moses went away and fasted for 40 day/nights. Where else have we heard the number forty referenced in scripture? For 40 days/nights Noah, his family and some animals were in the ark. The Israelites, who after being led by Moses, with God's help, out of Egypt, wandered in the wilderness for 40 years. Lent begins every year in the wilderness with Jesus fasting for 40 days. "Throughout scripture, the wilderness represents a place of preparation, a place of waiting for God's next move, a place of learning to trust in God's mercy" (Audrey West, workingpreacher.org). "The wilderness is the place Elijah went to gather his energies for his vocation, where John the Baptist began, where Paul went to gather for his work. The wilderness is disciplined withdrawal and regular retreat, in order to break the familiar linkages and dependencies and loyalties" (W. Brueggemann, *Collected Sermons*, p. 155). And in Luke's version of the story, immediately after Jesus is baptized and claimed as God's beloved son, Jesus is led by the Spirit into the wilderness. Here the wilderness has something to offer Jesus, and instead of taking a detour around it, he chooses to encounter its lessons. And in his forty days of fasting, resisting, and wandering, Jesus is shaped and formed for his public ministry. Today we begin with Jesus' first move into ministry before he goes public, his move into the desert where he is tempted by the devil- not once but three times. **PRAY. READ.**

My colleagues and I were sharing in our preaching group what we were going to give up or add to our lives for Lent this year. I always struggle with this. I get the point. The point of giving up or adding is to grow closer to God. However, there are different rules, and I forget and then I forget why I'm doing this thing for forty days (skip the Sundays). Every year on the first Sunday of Lent the gospel story is about the temptations of Jesus by the devil in the wilderness, as this story is featured in Matthew, Mark and Luke. What's strange is the timing of this story during the first week of Lent. One challenge is how quickly we switch the focus from Jesus' temptations to our own trials- "as if we could withstand the kind of inquisitions that Jesus faced. It's confusing though, as "Lent has its history of suggesting that the next seven weeks should be about examining those things in our lives that tempt us- and to give them up accordingly. And if you don't give something up for Lent, well, just what kind of Christian are you" (Karoline Lewis, *Identity Test*, Working Preacher, March 2019)? Insert eye roll here. This problem can offer a "reductive view of all temptations as garden-variety challenges to individual faith" (David Schnasa Jacobsen, workingpreacher.org, p. 1). In other words, our temptation might be to say that we're going to give up whatever tempts us the most for Lent- chocolate, coffee, wine, cursing, spending money on things we don't need, sweets, etc. This story of Jesus' temptations in the wilderness is just that- Jesus' temptations alone- not ours. And yet, most of the time when we turn to scripture or listen to a sermon, we're tempted to listen for how the biblical story relates to us or "what this text tells us to do instead of listening for the promise or the good news" (workingpreacher.org, podcast 2019).

So, then, what is the promise or the good news in today's biblical story? Let's look at the placement of this temptation story in Luke to give us some clues. Jesus has just come from the Jordan River where the Holy Spirit "descended upon him in bodily form like a dove and a voice came from heaven saying, 'You are my Son, the Beloved, with you I am well pleased'" (Luke 3:22). And then Jesus' genealogy is given right before today's story- tracing him back to David and then all the way back to Adam. "There are echoes here of Adam and Eve in the garden with the serpent whispering plausible lies about God, God's purposes and commands, and there are also echoes of Israel in the wilderness. It is a central part of Christian vocation to learn to recognize the voices that whisper attractive lies and to distinguish them from the voice of God" (N.T. Wright, *From Wilderness to Glory*). This is a story of Jesus' identity- not who Jesus is necessarily, as we as readers know that he is the Son of God from the angel's visit with Mary in chapter 1 (v. 35), and the devil also knows who Jesus is **but rather, how Jesus will live out his identity as the Son of God.** "If there had been any doubt about Jesus' begin really human, Luke underlines his sharing of our flesh and blood in this vivid scene of temptation" (Wright). **This is a story about how Jesus was tempted by Satan to abandon his vocation as the suffering Son of God.** Luke begins "Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness where for forty days he was tempted by the devil" (Luke 4:1-2). The Spirit leads and accompanies Jesus into the wilderness. In other words, the Holy Spirit escorts Jesus throughout these forty days and temptations. Jesus wasn't alone in the wilderness. "Wilderness" and

“desert”, used interchangeably in scripture, usually refer to uninhabited, waterless areas and “the writers certainly also had in mind parallels with Israel’s testing and feeding in the desert...in the wilderness for forty years... during the Exodus” (Paul Achtemeier, *Harper Collins’ Bible Dictionary*, p. 238). “God chooses the wilderness setting in which to reconstitute Israel as the people of God. Remember the wilderness is the space that summons Israel to reflect on who God is for the community and who the community is to God” (Shively Smith, *Connections*, p. 36). Therefore, it is appropriate that it was in the desert...in the wilderness that Jesus was tempted by Satan. Next we’re told that Jesus ate nothing at all during these forty days- he was hungry; no, he was famished- making him extremely vulnerable and maybe even hangry like in those Snickers commercials (but we aren’t told that part). This is when the devil makes his first move- playing on Jesus’ vulnerability and offering him the first temptation:” If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread” (Luke 4:3). Here “if” means “since.” Since you’re the Son of God...again, the devil knows who Jesus is. He wants to see if Jesus knows how to carry out his Spirit-anointed vocation as the Son of God. And what does Jesus do? He responds to the devil as an Israelite would- by quoting from the book of Deuteronomy (8:3)- “One does not live by bread alone” (v.4). The devil moves on to the second temptation.

This time the “if” is not the same as “since,” as in the case of the first temptation. This “if” here is more of a conditional statement. “If you worship me,” the devil says to Jesus, “then all the kingdoms of the world

will be yours” (Luke 4:7). Why are the kingdoms of the world the devil’s to give? They’re not really; however, we aren’t told the details, are we? Whatever it means, Jesus again refuses the temptation with scripture- from Deuteronomy (6:4)- “Worship the Lord your God and serve only him (4:8). The devil tries for a third time to tempt Jesus. This time we’re told that the devil takes Jesus to Jerusalem. Maybe it’s just a vision? What is interesting is that in Luke’s version, Luke “has Jerusalem and the Temple as the site of the third and final temptation. This is quite understandable since for Luke Jesus’ ministry leads toward Jerusalem and the Temple, the scene of his final struggle and trial” (James L. Mays, *Harper Collins’ Bible Commentary*, p. 934). This time the devil also quotes scripture- a Psalm (91:11-12), and he returns to the “if” meaning “since” pattern- “Since you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here” (v. 9). Jesus again refutes the devil with scripture- again from the Torah (Deut. 6:16) saying, “It is said, ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test’” (v. 12). In saying this, “Jesus turns the tables on this scripture-quoting devil. This last temptation is less a temptation for Jesus than an attempt to tempt God. God is not to be managed or provoked, even for the sake of the Son of God. And this is not just important here in Luke 4, but even more so in Luke 23:35-39 where this particular temptation will appear one final time in Luke’s gospel” (Schnasa Jacobsen). “If you are the king of the Jews, save yourself” (23:37). This last temptation, more than the others, calls for tremendous trust in God. Just because someone quotes scripture, like the devil did, doesn’t mean that they are in sync with what God is asking of us. Luke ends this story with a little line: “When the devil had finished every test,

he departed from him until an opportune time” (v. 13). And that time comes again, in Luke’s gospel, as the devil enters Judas when he betrays Jesus in his final hour (22:3).

Since Jesus has yet to begin his public ministry here in today’s story, we may assume that he could have struggled with what this all human and all God thing looks like in his messianic- Son of God- role?! “In order for this story to be real, it must not only be assumed that what Jesus was tempted to do he could do, but also that each temptation had strong appeal” (Mays). “Perhaps one takeaway from Jesus’ temptation that might make a difference for a life of faith, besides being reminded of the fact that Jesus is Jesus- and we are not [and that we’re never alone on life’s journey]- is the identity test—that who you are, who you have chosen to be, who God has called you to be, seems to be a truth that is tested often. In fact, every, single day” (Karoline Lewis, p. 1). One of my favorite quotes is from a 1980 commencement address Howard Thurman gave at Spelman college, entitled *The Sound of the Genuine*. He says, *There is something in every one of you that waits, listens for the sound of the genuine in yourself and if you cannot hear it, you will spend your days on the ends of strings that somebody else pulls...The sound of the genuine is flowing through you. Don’t be deceived and thrown off by all the noises that are a part even of your dreams, your ambitions, so that you don’t hear the sound of the genuine in you, because that is the only true guide that you will ever have, and if you don’t have that you don’t have a thing.*

And a piece of this authenticity can be discovered time and time again in the season of Lent, especially in the gift of lament. “It’s easy, when carried away with the joy of the gospel, to ignore the fact that the world is still in a mess; that the church is often muddled and sinful; that we ourselves still fail miserably in our love for God and for one another. The irony is that lament actually points to the true joy of the gospel. Being a Christian doesn’t mean pretending that everything is ‘all right really’ when actually it isn’t. That isn’t authentic. To lament is to recognize that things still are out of joint, and that we can and should bring our puzzled sorrow and frustration into God’s presence. This is a way we can join in with God’s sorrow at the continuing tragedy of his world” (Wright). Lent isn’t about having or looking like you have your stuff together; it’s about “purposely giving our faith permission to ‘work on us’” (Shively Smith, p. 37). Perhaps our Lenten discipline could be listening for the sound of the genuine in ourselves and doing that by telling the devil to get lost- and refuting those persons and things who try to tell us otherwise. Whatever your discipline or addition may be, I hope and pray it will help you to focus on things that listen for the sound of the genuine- for God- in you...trusting in God, who is at work, deepening your faith, especially when we find ourselves tempted beyond our own strength. “Jesus’ status as God’s son commits him, not to showy prestige, but to the strange path of humility, service, and finally death. Hear the good news: In God alone, the tempter is defeated. With God, evil never has the final say. When we don’t have the strength to withstand temptation, our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ can and does. **So, how will you live out your identity as a child of God this Lent?** Amen.