

## **Tested in the Wilderness**

*preached by Rev. Paul Sakasov on March 10, 2019*

Luke 4:1-13

Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, 2 where for forty days he was tempted by the devil. He ate nothing at all during those days, and when they were over, he was famished. 3 The devil said to him, 'If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread.' 4 Jesus answered him, 'It is written, "One does not live by bread alone."' 5 Then the devil led him up and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. 6 And the devil said to him, 'To you I will give their glory and all this authority; for it has been given over to me, and I give it to anyone I please. 7 If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours.' 8 Jesus answered him, 'It is written, "Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him."' 9 Then the devil took him to Jerusalem, and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, 'If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here, 10 for it is written, "He will command his angels concerning you, to protect you", 11 and "On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone."' 12 Jesus answered him, 'It is said, "Do not put the Lord your God to the test."' 13 When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time.

This morning marks the first Sunday in Lent. As you may recall Lent, literally translated from the Greek and Latin means the fortieth day before Easter. In many Christian denominations it is a solemn observance held in commemoration of the forty days Jesus spent fasting in the desert before the beginning of his public ministry. The traditional purpose of Lent is the preparation of the believer - through prayer (which represents justice towards God), fasting (which represents justice towards one's self), and almsgiving (which represents justice towards one's neighbour). In a manner inspired by Jesus' experience in the desert, the season of Lent calls the believer to enter the wilderness through the observance of sacrificial disciplines so that they may acquire an increased sensitivity to the voice of God as they journey together with Christ towards the cross and as they ponder the great mystery of their salvation. In other words, the season of Lent is a time of emptying ourselves of the things of this world, so that we may be filled with the things of God; especially as we head into the most sacred season in the church year, which is Holy Week, that culminates with Good Friday and Easter Sunday.

So this morning, as we begin the season of Lent and as we seek to empty ourselves of the distractions that prevent us from receiving and embracing the mercy and grace of God, let us start by contemplating the story that lies at the very heart of the Lenten season. Let us turn to our gospel reading and look at the story of Jesus

in the wilderness.

Starting with the literal and historical context, Jesus is at a major turning point in his life. Prior to this time he had lived in the remote village of Nazareth, in the household of Mary and Joseph where he worked as a carpenter. But now at the age of about thirty years, which is the age at which the Old Testament law calls for a priest to begin his priestly service, Jesus, following the call of God the Father, emerged from obscurity in order to reveal himself to the world as the Prophet, Priest, and King that the prophets of old said would come and save the world.

Accompanying him in his task, Jesus' cousin, John the Baptist, operating in the spirit of Elijah, had been the voice in the wilderness preparing the way for Jesus' ministry. As we learn in Luke chapter three, John had been preaching to the people, in the desert, along the banks of the Jordan river, calling the people to repent and to be baptized. In the latter verses of chapter three, Jesus comes to John and is baptized by him. At this time John declares to the crowds gathered that Jesus is God's Messiah and the Holy Spirit descends on Jesus like a dove and a voice from heaven also affirms the identity of Jesus, thus affirming the identity and mandate of Jesus in a manner consistent with the Old Testament requirement that all truth be established in the court of law by two or three witnesses.

From there Jesus is led by the Spirit into the desert where he is tempted by the devil for forty days. This point is very significant as the number forty occurs in so many key stories throughout Scripture. For example, when Noah was in the ark, it rained forty days and forty nights. When Moses went up Mount Sinai to receive the Ten Commandments, he was there forty days and forty nights. After the Law was received, the people of Israel spent forty years wandering in the desert before entering into the promised land. When Jonah preached to the city of Nineveh he declared the judgement of God would come in forty days. Kings David and Solomon each reigned over Israel for forty years. When the prophet Elijah went to meet with God at Mount Horeb after his confrontation with the prophets of Baal he traveled through the desert for forty days and forty nights. After Jesus rose from the grave he spent forty days living among the disciples before he ascended into heaven. Summarizing this list, the number forty represents God's judgement, God's Law, the godly reign of God's anointed over God's people, and God's mercy. Furthermore, the number forty occurs in stories that mark key transitions in the life of God's people and in human history.

Thus, when Jesus spends forty days and nights in the wilderness, we are made aware through the other uses of the number forty throughout Scripture that we are witnessing a major turning point, not just in Jesus' life, but, in human history. By telling us that Jesus spent forty days and nights in the wilderness, Luke is telling

the reader that God is about to move in a manner visible for all to see and deliver his judgement, establish his law, establish a king to reign over God's people, while demonstrating God's mercy; and God is about to do all this through Jesus the Son of God and Jesus Son of Man.

As an aside, notice in chapter three that right after the voice from heaven declares that "this is my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased," Luke gives Jesus' earthly genealogy tracing his roots all the way back to Adam. The reason Luke does this is to establish Jesus' dual identity as the Son of God and the Son of Man right at the beginning of his gospel, so we might be crystal clear about who it is that God is about to use to usher in a new chapter in human history.

Also notice that Jesus emerges from the waters of baptism before he heads into the desert for forty days and forty nights. This is another sure sign that God is up to something big. Again, turning to Scripture, in the beginning, God spoke to the the waters of the earth and the land from which all living creatures were made, including Adam, emerged. In the times of Noah, a new era in human history began as the earth emerged from the flood waters. In the days of Moses a new nation was born as the people of Israel emerged from the Red Sea, and then headed into the desert before entering the Promised Land. And now in the gospel of Luke Jesus emerges from the Jordan River and heads into the desert for forty days as the kingdom of God is about to be revealed.

Turning our attention more towards the actual Scripture reading itself, during this time of preparation in the wilderness, a time in which Jesus did not eat anything, Luke tells us that the Devil came to him, like he came to Adam, and tried to throw him off course. Noting that Jesus was hungry, Satan said to him, "If you are the Son of God turn these stones into bread." In response Jesus, quoting Scripture says, "Man shall not live by bread alone but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God."

By responding to Satan in such a manner, Jesus makes a sharp contrast between the old order and the new order that God is establishing. While the old order is based on gratifying bodily needs and pleasures, the kingdom of God is rooted in the desire to please God above all else. This is not to say that taking care of the body is not important. However, in the kingdom of God pleasing God is the top priority; whereas in the kingdom of Adam, our wants and desires will always take precedence over the ways of God.

Continuing on with Jesus' temptation in the desert, the Devil then took Jesus to the top of the temple and said, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down

and let the angels catch you.” Jesus replied with another Scripture, “do not put the Lord your God to the test.” By saying so, we again see the difference between the fallen world and the redeemed world that God is building through Christ. In the fallen world our focus is on safety and security. However, in God’s kingdom being obedient is our only goal.

In the third temptation the Devil took Jesus to a high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their glory and offered them to Christ in return for his worship. And again, without thinking, Jesus responded with Scripture, “You shall worship the Lord your God and serve him only.” While the people of the kingdom of Adam are enticed by the empty promises of money, fame, power, amusements, and popularity; the citizens of the kingdom of God long to see the face of God and are completely satisfied with a vision of God’s glory.

However, in order to make the transition between the kingdom of Adam and the kingdom of Christ, we need to spend time in the desert. For it is only in the desert, where all the distractions of daily life are removed that we learn that nothing matters more in life than being right with God. It is only in the desert that we discover that the glory of God is more sustaining and essential to our well being than having food to eat, water to drink or having any other bodily need satisfied. It is only in the desert that we learn to trust God with the faith of a child. It is only in the desert that we learn how truly empty and worthless money, fame, power, amusements, and popularity truly are. It is only in the desert that we are emptied of the false gods and false beliefs in our lives. It is only in the desert that we are emptied of the things of this world and then filled with the things of God.

Given the importance of the desert experience to our spiritual lives, the elders of the ancient church sought to lead the sheep under their care to the desert on a frequent basis. Hence we have the Lenten season. So today as we embark on the six week journey towards the cross, may the Spirit lead us to the desert so that we might have our priorities changed, and our hearts renewed. May the Spirit lead us to a place of prayer, fasting, and almsgiving so that we may act justly towards God, ourselves, and our neighbour. May the Spirit lead us to the desert so that we may emerge like Christ focused and empowered to fulfill God’s plan for our lives. May the Spirit lead us to the desert so that we may glorify God and enjoy him forever.