

A Sermon for DaySpring

by Eric Howell

A Wilderness Release

Matthew 4:1-11

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The gospel takes us with Jesus into the wilderness where he is tempted by the devil. He is tempted to other ways of being a messiah than the way that leads to rejection, suffering, and death on a cross. Turn stones to bread and be a messiah that gives everyone what they want when they want, when they want it, and you'll win their affection. Jump off the temple and be a messiah who performs a circus of signs and wonders, and you'll win their amazement. Gain all the military and political power in the world, and you can demand their allegiance. Or . . . reject these things and face the consequences at the hands of a human race that will reject, despise, and crucify.

Jesus' responses are all taken from the Old Testament experiences of Israel in the wilderness. Like Israel went through the Red Sea, Jesus came through the waters of baptism. Like Israel then was thrust into the vast wilderness for 40 years, so was Jesus for 40 days. NT Wright points out that Jesus faces in forty days and nights the equivalent of Israel's 40 years in the desert. (*Matthew for Everyone*, 26).

Here we are, the beginning of the 40-day season of Lent. Maybe this is kind of new to you. For a lot of Baptists over all the years, Lent was something quite foreign. Our exposure to Lent was through that one kid in the school cafeteria who would eat fish sticks on Fridays in March. Somewhere along the way, you learned he was Catholic, which you didn't know much about. So, you ate your sloppy joe while he ate fish sticks, and you didn't ask too many questions. Then somewhere along the way, you realized something of existential importance with ecumenical implications—fish sticks are pretty good. Who doesn't think that? Fish sticks are amazing. Fish sticks are the great underrated mass produced, artificially marketed offerings in the pre-battered, frozen case section of the grocery store, or even the Dollar General if you're in a pinch.

Lent, we thought and wondered about, was about fish sticks and not eating chocolate; something about fasting that Catholic parents did to their children to make them give up sweets or hamburgers for a month or so. It seemed kind of strange for those who didn't quite see the point. Later, we learned later that Lent is 40 days of prayer and devotion to Jesus and his way to the cross. That didn't sound so bad but was definitely not something Baptists did since, you know, Lent is not in the Bible.

But you know what is in the Bible, the cross, of course, and also Jesus being led to the wilderness for a long period of prayer and fasting, 40 days, where he was tempted and resisted temptation, where he suffered, but trusted God in his trials, and where he prepared for his ministry that would be the path to the cross. If that sounds something like Lent, well, it's

supposed to. The wilderness experience of Christ is the road map for the spiritual season of Lent for Christians.

And here we are. Being led by the Spirit, or at least by the liturgical calendar, from the twinkly lights and warm glow of the Christmas and Epiphany seasons toward the deep wilderness of Lent where, for those who lean into it, calls for some kind of discipline, some abstinence, some self-denial, and probably some repentance.

As glum as that may sound, it is very good news. “Most of us are so distracted by our gadgets, so busy with our work, so addicted to our pleasures, and so resistant to our depths that a nice long spell in the wilderness is just what we need.” (Barbara Brown Taylor) Some time in the wilderness would do us some good. We are shot through with worry about what tomorrow may bring, and tomorrow’s tomorrow may bring. We can’t shake loose of our past resentments we carry around like a backpack. We cling to our selfishness, like without them, we would starve. We are tangled in knots of old regrets and persistent habits of sin. And all of this unstable existence is perched on a mountain of bodies and cultures and environments trampled for generations in the quest that our culture has for comfort and security. It’s like the devil shows up and shows us all the kingdoms of the world and says, “all these I will give you if you fall down and worship me.” And we shrug: worship you? Why bother? All I want and more is already mine; I am a god.

But these walls of individualism, envy, and superficial optimism (Markey) that hold the world at bay can’t protect us from what we know deep down—our castles are built on foundations of shifting sand.

Some time in some wilderness would do us some good if it helps us find again the path to solid ground, to the solid rock, to true peace, to genuine love, to true hope.

No one can make you go into the wilderness. God’s Spirit drove Jesus out there. You have a choice to make. But if you’ve been looking for some excuse to head down your own mountaintop and pray, this is it. If you’ve been looking for some way to trade in your old neuroses for new spiritual movement in your life, look no further. This is your chance to leave the so-called comfort of the rickety self-assurance you’ve hammered together, to enter the desert silence and listen for whatever God has to say to you.

But be aware: Simplicity can be scary.
Silence can be intimidating.
Solitude can be unnerving.

It’s just a lot easier to fill the days and fill the mind with noise and distractions and consumption. It keeps the inner self pushed out of sight and drowns out the voices.

Simplicity, silence, solitude. That’s when the voices come that know how to get right to our weaknesses and vulnerabilities. We’re not all tempted like Jesus. We’re all tempted in ways

perfectly designed for each of us to choose paths other than the path of Jesus. The temptations we face, day by day and at critical moments of decision, vocation, and relationship in our lives may be very different from those of Jesus, but they have the same point. As NT Wright says, they are not simply trying to entice us to commit this or that sin. They are trying to distract us, to turn us aside from the path of servanthood to which our baptism has commissioned us. (*Matthew for Everyone*, 26) Those temptations, they know how to get to us no matter how much we try to run from them. Those voices, they show up just when we are trying to be spiritual—that's when those voices are the loudest, and sometimes, the most persuasive.

The wilderness isn't where we go to get away from the voices or their temptations. That's not what happens in wilderness, or Lent, or in church, or in prayer. It's not where we go to run away from them. It's where we go to finally confront them, to do the battle that's been waiting for us all along that we've been resisting with our distractions. It's where we go to wrestle with them, to deal with our vices, our temptations, our sins, our waywardness, all the things in our lives that need to be dealt with. This is where we come to wrestle openly and honestly with all that. This is the time of truth, and because of that, it is the time of grace.

Repentance is the courage that confronts the voices that whisper of other ways besides the way of Jesus; of confronting the vices that lead our feet from the path of Christ; of confronting the ways we have done what we ought not to have done and not done what we ought to have done, and that we need help. There are prayers of confession that are individual for each of us that emerge from our hearts and our circumstances and our patterns. Those prayers come in our own words or go even beyond words, but there are also prayers of confession that have been used by churches over the years. There's one that has caught my attention that seems particularly humble and poignant. The prayer that sometimes congregations will recite and share goes:

*I confess to almighty God
and to you, my brothers and sisters,
that I have greatly sinned,
in my thoughts and in my words,
in what I have done and
in what I have failed to do,*

You notice the confession there that the church invokes is a prayer to God and a kind of vulnerability before one another. What would it be like to be a community that could withstand and have that kind of vulnerability with one another? God, I confess to you and I confess to you that I have greatly sinned in all these ways. The prayer continues, in a striking way, because the prayer continues in three lines at which the congregants strike their chest with each line. Have you ever done this prayer? Maybe it's just for people who eat fish sticks on Fridays. It strikes me as one that seems powerful. You strike your chest as you pray:

through my fault, through my fault, through my most grievous fault.

And again, that sounds gloomy and glum, but it is a release, isn't it? There's a release in telling the truth, and there is not release like it. When we are able to and when we come to the point to tell the truth of ourselves, in the church's long history of giving us liturgies to pray, this one, which we manifest by the act of striking your own chest is a confession, which ends like this:

Therefore, I ask you, my brothers and sisters to pray for me to the Lord.

The wilderness is solitary, yet we remember, we are not alone. Repentance is not merely confronting what we've been letting root in our lives for too long; it is the trust to ask God to show us all the truth of ourselves we cannot even see alone, and in some cases, it is asking others to pray for us on the journey from our failings. This takes courage and trust. It is the path to freedom and to God. That's what we hunger for. We hunger for freedom, and we hunger for God.

There's been a lot of renewed awe and interest recently about revival. You may have seen revival experienced as an outpouring of God's spirit upon those gathered in prayer at a college in Wilmore, Kentucky. The students, the local population, as many as 50,000 visitors from around the nation have testified to the power of what was taking place there. Some days the line to get in the chapel stretched half a mile long. They say it's the first spiritual revival of the 21st century. One volunteer said this is a Gen Z revival, marked by overwhelming peace for a generation marked by overwhelming anxiety. People came. People hunger for spiritual experiences. Why? Because we crave the spirit of God. "Never could I have imagined what we are experiencing now," said university president Kevin Brown, who spent several very late nights in the chapel. "There's a deep hunger born of this trenchant dissatisfaction and disillusionment with what has been handed to the younger generation, and I think they're just raising their gaze to higher things."

When you feel like you've been part of that kind of experience, and if it's something more than just an emotional experience, you're not the same afterwards. It changes you. I hope that transformation for each of them and join in praying that spiritual transformation for each of those privileged to be part of it. There are many examples in history of people experiencing revival through a transformative communal outpouring of God's spirit that makes them feel accepted, encouraged, and close to God.

But you know what there's a lot more of? Both in scripture and in the experience of people? Wilderness. Transformation that comes only through silence, solitude, and even suffering. These times of transformation are not televised or tik-tocked; usually they are faced by those who would feel utterly alone were it not for an unexplainable sense that God is with them through it all. If history shows us anything and if the gospels show us anything, it is that the path to spiritual transformation most often comes in the wilderness of life not on the mountaintops, at the foot of the cross not the seat of comfort.

So maybe the word Lent isn't in the Bible. It's not, but Lent is shorthand for the spiritual journey this season observes as we are led into prayer. Lead our feet in the paths of righteousness, we

pray; make more room possible within us for the courageous work of following Christ. Create in me a clean heart and renew a steadfast spirit within me.

So, when you are in the wilderness of life, led there by a liturgical season or led there by your own desire to renew your faith or driven there by some pain or loss or uncertainty, you are not alone. Christ is there. The footprints of others who have gone before you are already there. And Christ is there. Christ is always there, roaming the lonely valleys, wastelands and borderlands of human experience, searching for all who are out there.

Out there, out here, he still does not turn stones into bread. He becomes the bread, the bread of life broken open for you.

Thanks be to God.

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