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[Matthew 4:1-12](#)

### **“Giving Up Control”**

*Most loving and gracious God, we are here to begin this season of Lent with you and with each other. We pray that in these 40 days you will be with us, guiding us and teaching us. Help us to see how the life of your Son and our lives intersect. May this time help us to grow closer to you. We pray this in the name of the Resurrected One. Amen.*

While preparing bulletins for the Ash Wednesday service, Marie asked me how many she should print. “Not many,” I replied. “Ash Wednesday isn’t a day Presbyterians have historically observed.” I used to say *traditionally observed*, but that’s no longer accurate since most Presbyterian churches have been observing Ash Wednesday for about 25 years or so. Of course, in Presbyterian circles 25 years isn’t that long.

I can remember one of the 1<sup>st</sup> Ash Wednesday services held at the church where I grew up and asking “Will we go?” And I think the reply back was along the lines of, “No. Only Catholics do that.”

But thanks to the liturgical renewal movement, which introduced Protestants to the beauty and movement of the liturgical calendar and its seasons, we now observe Ash Wednesday and Lent. And I, for one, wouldn’t have it any other way.

Now, if you go looking for any reference to Lent in your Bible, you won’t find one because there was no such thing as Lent in biblical times. The custom of observing a 40 day period in preparation for Easter didn’t arise until later, when the initial rush of being a follower of Jesus lost its adrenaline.

You see, when Jesus didn’t return as he said he would, his followers got a little ho-hum and their faith went on auto-pilot. As Barbara Brown Taylor puts it:

“Little by little, Christians became devoted to their comforts (instead of God): the soft couch, the flannel sheets, the leg of lamb roasted with rosemary. These things made them feel safe and cared for--if not by God, then by themselves. (Barbara Brown Taylor, “Settling for Less”, February 18, 1998)

Knowing this, someone suggested it was time to call Christians back to their senses, and the Bible offered clues on how to do that. Israel spent 40 years in the wilderness learning how to trust God; and Jesus spent 40 days in the wilderness being tested by the devil. There are also other examples of the number 40 in the Bible, all of which represent a time of testing and challenge to the person or people involved because they needed to discard

their old habits that kept them separate from God and form new ones that placed them closer to God.

So the early church announced a season of Lent, from the old English word Lenten, meaning “spring”, which is not only a reference to the season before Easter, but also an invitation to a springtime for the soul. Forty days to cleanse the system and open the eyes to what remains when all comfort is gone. Forty days to remember what it is like to live by the grace of God alone and not by what we can supply for ourselves.

Which is why we always hear the story of Jesus’ temptation on the 1<sup>st</sup> Sunday of Lent. In the wilderness, Jesus had to learn what it was like to live by the grace of God alone and now by what the devil could supply for him.

Wilderness suggests a thick, impenetrable forest with no path, and no way to follow. But Jesus’ wilderness is just the opposite, miles and miles, as far as the eye can see, of barren, arid, rocky desert; no contrast, no green, no noticeable life. It’s south of Jericho, utterly barren, and very frightening. It’s also absolutely quiet. If you sit in this wilderness, the silence is literally deafening, so silent that you hear a humming in your head which, I am told, is the sound of your own nervous system. (*John Buchanan, “Your Mortality is Showing”, March 4, 2001*)

I have a sneaking suspicion that all of us have been in a metaphorical wilderness like that, where we can hear our nerves on edge. We have gotten lost there, wondered where God was, and couldn’t wait to get out of there.

Wildernesses take many different forms. Maybe your wilderness looked like a hospital waiting room, or a doctor’s office when you got news you really didn’t want to hear . . . maybe it looked like your empty office at work on the day you learned you were being let go, or maybe it was your empty office on the day of your retirement, when you realized you needed to forge a new identity for yourself; maybe your wilderness looked like the fellowship hall of a church where you go to find recovery and meet with other addicts; or maybe it was a strange bed you slept in after getting kicked out of your house or getting divorced or going off to school or living in your first apartment because you had to re-learn how to navigate your way in the world.

While a real wilderness may be fun for some people, the metaphorical one for most of us is not. We’re lost in that wilderness, and I don’t know anyone who likes being lost. In the wilderness the old ways and habits and devices that kept us going and moving in a certain direction no longer work. Symbolically speaking, our cell phones don’t get any reception in the wilderness and if we’re there long enough they go dead. And since most of us aren’t prepared to live in the wilderness, we haven’t brought along our charger. So there we are, feeling very alone. What do we do now?

As many of you know, about a year ago this time, my Mom was very sick. She was in the hospital for a raging infection that was overtaking her already weakened body. I remember standing by her bed, begging her to eat something, and when she refused,

breaking down in tears, sobbing uncontrollably. I felt completely hopeless and very alone. I felt in over my head, making decisions I wasn't prepared to make, and praying I wouldn't be faced to make decisions I didn't want to make. At least not alone.

It was an awful wilderness that I suspect many of you have walked through. Which means you also know that when you're that deep in the wilderness, completely helpless and lost, about the only choice we have to make is to consent to being helpless and lost and let God be God.

When you're that deep in the wilderness, there's not much else you can do but trust God to be God. Now I need to be honest with you and tell you that while this rock-bottom level of trust may come naturally for some, it doesn't come that naturally for me. Every time I'm in the wilderness it's a skill I need to re-learn. I need to re-learn letting go of those old habit of control and the self-determination and self-reliance and the "I can do anything if I work hard enough" attitude that goes with control-all attitudes that get me pretty far in life, but they don't work in the wilderness.

In the wilderness, you learn the skill of handing over the reigns of control to God, and the skill of relying on the support of other people, many of whom have also spent time in the wilderness. See, that's the things about wildernesses, after you've been there you're much more empathetic to those who are in them.

Someone once wrote that, "The hardest thing for any of us to believe is that the wilderness has anything to do with God. It rather feels like God has vanished. But the gospel tells us that it was the Spirit who drove Jesus into the wilderness...not a personal mistake, not a deed of punishment, not the devil, but the Spirit of God."

I don't know if the Spirit of God led me to my Mom's bedside; I'd like to think the Spirit didn't, but when I can now look at that experience from the outside in, I can see that the wilderness-in a strange, baffling, troubling sort of way-is God's gift to us, because we learn from the wilderness that we must live an Easter faith in a Good Friday world. We learn to trust God to the very core of our being, because only when we have been tested beyond our own strength can we learn to rely on the One who was tested beyond measure and yet remained strong for us.

Michael Lindvall writes that the wilderness is real (we don't really need to be told that), and each of us knows the names of our wilderness. He also says that in the wilderness, the question to ask is not "Why?" Why is this happening to me? But how? How will this wilderness experience change me? He then goes on to quote Hemingway in *A Farewell to Arms*, who wrote "The world breaks everyone, and afterward many are strong in the broken places."

He then gives examples. John Milton went blind and then wrote his greatest poetry; Beethoven lost his hearing and went on composing; Nelson Mandela, Helen Keller, Louis Pasteur . . .all lived in a wilderness and did great things. Terry Waite, held hostage for

years in Beirut, said, "Christianity doesn't in any way lessen suffering. What it does is enable you to take it, to face it, to work through it and eventually to convert."

In the wilderness, Jesus learned that there were limits; that we're not always in control and there are some things beyond our control. But he also learned one other things. The devil quoted Psalm 91: "He will command his angels concerning you, to protect you . . . their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against the stone."

"He will deliver you from the snare of the fowler," the psalm says. "Under his wings you will find refuge. . . . Because you have made the Lord your refuge . . . no evil shall befall you."

What Jesus learned in the wilderness, is a lesson we can take comfort in: that evil most certainly does "befall us," but no matter what, God does not abandon us; and that whatever limits we have to endure—we are ultimately safe in the love that will never leave us, love that will hold us up and give us the strength and courage we need to live each day.

Amen.

Sources:

Barbara Brown Taylor, "Settling For Less", Christian Century Magazine, 1998

An Altar in the World, Barbara Brown Taylor

Feasting n the Word, Year C, Volume 2, Readings for the 1<sup>st</sup> Sunday in Lent

Michael Lindvall, A Geography of God