

Into the Wilderness

Psalm 91:1-2, 9-16; Luke 4:1-13

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The Great Wall of China is an overwhelming structure which cost an immense amount of money and labor. When it was finished, it appeared impregnable. But the enemy breached it. Not by breaking it down or going around it. They did it by bribing the gatekeepers. I forget who said it, but when you flee temptation, be sure you don't leave a forwarding address.

Today we are talking about Jesus' temptation by the devil in the wilderness. Interestingly, he was tempted for forty days. Which is why the season of Lent starts forty days before Easter—forty days which do not include Sundays, or holy days.

The number 40 is all over the Old and New Testament. For example, Israel spent forty years in the wilderness, in what is called the Exodus.

The Exodus and the Temptations are related in another way as well-- by their purpose. The Israelites were in the wilderness to prepare them for their vocation as the "chosen people." And Jesus was in the desert for forty days to prepare him for his life in ministry, his life as the "chosen one," as the Messiah.

Lent is our time of preparation also. On one level, it prepares us for the joy and excitement that is Easter. But on another level, a deeper level, it is our preparation for our life as followers of Christ.

Self-denial, the giving up of something for Lent. Part of the Lenten journey is that in the Temptation in the desert were times of deprivation and denial. But why deny anything? How does denial help the Christian in today's world?

Denying yourself means seeking the good of others before looking out for yourself. When you are willing to sacrifice your time, energy, rights, position, reputation, privileges, comforts, and even your very life for the sake of Christ, you exemplify what it means to deny yourself: As the Gospel tells us, "Whoever finds their life will lose it, and whoever loses their life for my sake will find it."

In the early church, Lent was not needed. Christians started off as a persecuted minority. No self-denial needed when you could be thrown to the lions at any time.

But in the 4th century, Christianity became the official religion of the empire. As Christianity grew, Christians became the majority and Christianity was easy. Not being Christian was more of the problem since Christianity was required, supported by the state government, and the thing that you better do if you want to *avoid* persecution.

So the Church made the people experience their own version of the desert – and imposed time of self-denial.

In today's story, there are three temptations. We are told that Jesus is starving. He is famished. And so the first temptation is for him to use his powers to turn stones into food, into bread. But he refuses to use his power from God for his own needs. This is the gospel writer's way of letting us know that Jesus doesn't see himself as that important. He denies himself food because he would rather exalt the power of God for the glory of God. Not for his own gain.

The second temptation was that he could have great power and all the kingdoms in the world could be his. Again, he's not interested. He denies power that isn't from God.

The third temptation was to throw himself off the pinnacle of the Temple in Jerusalem and wait for God to save him. The devil is a bit of a drama queen, if you ask me. Jesus won't do that either because he knows he's not supposed to be the center of everything. He denies himself that bit of notoriety.

Three temptations have a common theme. The common theme is this: Jesus is tempted with making himself a much more important person than he is. He was being tempted to make it all about him.

But is that our temptation at First Church?

I think that our temptation is not to be greater than we are, our temptation is to be less than we are.

How can a Church be less than they are?

Easy.

By giving up without trying.

By forgetting who they are.

We are tempted to give up without trying.

A businessman driving home from work one day, saw a little league baseball game in progress. He decided to stop and watch. He sat down in the bleachers and asked a kid what the score was. "We're behind 14 to nothing," he answered with a smile.

"Really," he responded. "I have to say you don't look very discouraged."

"Discouraged?" the boy asked. "Why should we be discouraged? We haven't been up to bat yet."

As we come out of the pandemic, we could say that as a church, we have not been up to bat yet. We are standing at the plate, taking a few practice swings, eyeing the pitcher, and looking to outfield. But when that ball comes to us, we want to hit it out of the park.

We'll be ready. Ready for new members, a renewed financial commitment to our vision and mission. Ready for a big homerun on youth and children. Ready to ask, what it important here at First Church with the pandemic behind us and all that we have learned.

We are tempted to give up too soon.

We are also tempted to forget who we are.

Many years ago, Khrushchev spoke to an audience and was severely critical of Stalin—who had at this point, died. While he was speaking someone from the audience sent up a note: "What were you doing when Stalin committed all these atrocities?" The note was unsigned. Khrushchev shouted, "Who wrote this?" Not a person moved and the room was silent.

"I'll give him one minute to stand up!" The seconds ticked off. Still no one moved.

"All right, I'll tell you what I was doing. I was doing exactly what the writer of this note is doing right now. Nothing! I did nothing."

As a church, we should never give into the temptation to remain silent.

One thing good New England churches do is that when we are faced with injustice, we study it, we form book groups, and host discussion sessions, and offer prayer. But then we are done and we don't realize that we are now complicit like Stalin was claiming to be complicit.

There was no more obvious a time of silence than during the early 19th century growing slave trade in this country, especially the New England churches. We tend to think that in New England the churches were against slavery and stood up against slavery. A few did, most did not. They responded to slavery with careful silence.

Rev. Dr. W. Franklyn Richardson at The National Council of Churches Christian Unity Gathering, had this to say:

"During this enslavement, many Christian churches adopted an accommodating theology for the practice of slavery—a practice which continued after the emancipation, into the Jim Crow era, and beyond. Clergy produced extravagant explanations to accommodate the slave owners, who were members and leaders of their congregations. More devastating was the silence of the church at a time when something needed to be said. The pulpits of white congregations knew better, but had no prophetic courage to speak or to act."

It is a dark day for Christianity, when the church gives up its prophetic voice. The church then ceases to be anything but a social club with a beautiful building.

"Don't preach me politics from the pulpit," I occasionally hear church members say.

Don't worry I won't. I hate politics. I am sick of politics. The politicizing of our country is much of what is ruining us.

Our problem with the pulpit is that we mistake the prophetic voice for the political voice. The prophetic voice is the call for justice, it is the challenge to values and goals that do not follow the words and ways of Jesus. The prophetic voice that comforts the suffering and gives hope to the oppressed. The prophetic voice gives a vision of God's life and future. Since the prophetic voice is always relevant to the time in which it is speaking, it can sound political. It is not.

In Death Valley there is a place known as Dante's View. There, you can look down to the lowest spot in the United States, a depression in the earth 200 feet below sea level. But from that same spot, you can also look up to the highest peak in the United States, Mount Whitney, rising to a height of 14,500 feet. One way leads to the lowest and the other way to the highest. Any movement must be in one or the other direction.

At First Church, with the pandemic lifting, stand where choices must be made. We don't want to **give up too soon and we do not want to act without courage.**

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Rev. Jane apologizes, but she preaches from her notes, - so her sermons may not translate as well into a printed, document format. However, she loves to discuss her sermons, - so feel free to email her with any thoughts or questions!