

Lent 1-March 6, 2022

Baltic and East Nidaros Lutheran Parish

Luke 4:1-13

“The Wilderness” - Sermon by Pastor Randall J. Questad

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen

As we begin the season of Lent, a season of 40 days of reflection, it can be a lonely time. The image on your bulletin seems to suggest that Jesus is also alone and reflecting on the next 40 days of his journey in the wilderness. 40 days is a long time to be alone. The first lesson for today marks the end of a period of 40 years of God’s people wandering in a wilderness just before they are about to enter the promised land. Whenever the number 40 appears in scripture, whether it is 40 days or 40 years, the number 40 refers to a long period of time. I know some of you who have wondered about the uncertainty of difficult decisions or medical tests that will happen within a period of less than two days. For you, 40 hours might seem like an eternity of time as you reflect on your unknown future. As we were about to leave a store in an outlet mall in Arizona, we couldn’t find our granddaughter who had hidden herself in a display rack of clothes. We rushed outside and looked to see if we had missed her leaving the store. We were frantically afraid of what might have happened to her for 40 seconds in this brief wilderness experience.

The “wilderness” that God’s chosen people lived in for 40 years and the “wilderness” that Jesus was led to and whatever the “wilderness” that you may be experiencing in your life are often falsely described by pictures like the one on your bulletin where Jesus is alone or by the feelings of being totally alone that can overwhelm you by the trial or temptation that you are facing.

The reality is that “wildernesses” are not places of isolation. They are not places Jesus or you have been led into as places of punishment. They are not places that God has placed you in to reflect on your bad behavior and when God has decided you have spent enough time in time out and reflecting about something you have done wrong, he will return and set you free. No, wildernesses are places that God leads you so that whatever trial you are facing, you are to feel that God is close to you and will provide whatever you need to lead you to the other side.

To be sure, just as the devil tempted Jesus in his 40 days in the wilderness, even though Jesus is with you in your wilderness experience, the devil will not be afraid to come and tempt you as well. God’s chosen people were tempted many times during their 40-year wilderness journey to listen to the devil rather than trust in the Lord, but as the first lesson confirms, God remained with them as they were now led to the other side of the wilderness into the land that the Lord has promised to them before entering the wilderness. The promise given to them was never voided by their times of questioning the Lord.

Jesus was not alone while he was tempted by the devil in the wilderness. He had just received a promise from his heavenly Father as he was baptized in the Jordan River. Unfortunately, the next event for Jesus wasn’t a party to celebrate this important event in his life where his family got together to enjoy a meal and bring him gifts to remember the day. Instead, Jesus was led by the same Spirit that he was now filled with into the wilderness to be tempted. The devil waited 40 days before tempted Jesus with food. I would fall for the temptation of food far sooner. I am tempted between the main meal and dessert. As you recall, as soon as Eve showed Adam that the fruit was pleasing to his sight, he too was ready to eat and fell into temptation.

The devil used food as his first temptation to the hungry Jesus. However, the real test was not about if he would turn the stones into loaves of bread, but it was the very first word that the devil said to Jesus that was the real test. The devil began with the word, "If". If you are the son of God. At that very moment, Jesus knew that the devil had changed what God had just told him in the Jordan River from he WAS the son of God into IF he really was God's beloved Son. But Jesus was not half full of the Spirit or partially full. He was still full of the Spirit and just with his word Jesus sent the devil and his empty promises away.

The devil does not give up easily or with one try and tempts the still hungry Jesus two more times. Jesus sends the devil away by not giving the devil any interest in what he had to say or any curiosity of what the devil said he had to offer. Jesus knew they were lies and gave Satan no time. As we will sing in Martin Luther's hymn today, "A Mighty Fortress is Our God", Jesus subdues the devil with one little word by naming Satan a liar. Jesus quotes scripture to combat Satan and his lies. When Satan took Jesus on the pinnacle of the temple, Satan quoted from the Psalm that we read for today. The psalm from which the hymn we sing, "On Eagle's Wings" comes from. So, I would not suggest that you enter a scripture quoting match with Satan. He knows scripture well. All you need to do is send him away by placing your trust in God alone.

Another important lesson about wildernesses is that they are not places where temptations and trials are removed from your life. The more conveniences we have and the more selfish we have become in having what we want, we are led to believe it is the will of God to remove any suffering from our lives. And if God doesn't seem to get the job done, we will do what we can to make our lives easier for ourselves. The wilderness was a place where God's Spirit led Jesus. The wilderness is a place where Satan visits and trials occur. The wilderness is not the garden of Eden before sin entered the world. The wilderness is where God is present and protects and provides for you. The wilderness is a temporary place in this life you will reside before reaching your promised land and it will not be without suffering or trials.

As we begin this season of Lent, remember the day that you were baptized. The day that your heavenly Father made a promise to you. Remember that his promise to you cannot be voided by how you respond to your wilderness experiences. But know that whatever wilderness you face, no matter how long it seems to last, you are never left alone. And you have been filled with the Holy Spirit which will sustain you against trials and the Holy Spirit will give you the words to send Satan away when he comes to tempt you. Since you have not entered into the promised land, you will not have to look for wilderness experiences to come your way. They will find you, but you will not be left alone.

I have said that I was looking forward to the day when I didn't see an image of the coronavirus on the news preceding updates on new infections, recoveries, and deaths. Well, that day has come, but now the news is dominated by the unrest and damage in the Ukraine. I have received prayer requests this week for people you know who are suffering in different ways; We are indeed still in the wilderness, but more importantly, we are not alone. Jesus is present with you and will lead you to the other side. Amen