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Matthew 4:1-11
Wilderness Times

As we begin the season of Lent this week, the season which prepares us to journey to the cross and the empty tomb, we are in the Gospel of Matthew. And to recap where we have been, we began Advent with the genealogy of Jesus, hearing how he is the fulfillment of the Old Testament prophecies of the Messiah. We heard the story of Jesus' birth as told through his father Joseph. We journeyed with the magi who traveled great distances to pay homage to this newborn king. Responding to threats from King Herod, Jesus' family fled to Egypt, refugees avoiding persecution in their homeland. Eventually they returned home to Nazareth where Jesus was raised. We then participated in Jesus' baptism by John Baptist. In the first three chapters we have already seen many facets of Jesus and yet we are still seeking to understand him Who is this Jesus? As we hear in our scripture this morning, following his baptism, he is one who faces a time in the wilderness, facing temptations of materialism, security and prestige. How did this time in the wilderness shape Jesus' ministry? How do we respond to our wilderness times? Hear now these words from Matthew chapter 4.

Matthew 4:1-11

Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tested by the devil. He fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterward he was famished. The tempter came and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread." But Jesus answered, "It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.' "

Then the devil took him to the holy city and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down, for it is written, 'He will command his angels concerning you,' and 'On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.' " Jesus said to him, "Again it is written, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.' "

Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their glory, and he said to him, "All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me." Then Jesus said to him, "Away with you, Satan! for it is written, 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.' "Then the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him. **This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.**

I subscribe to this wonderful weekly blog from a group called Sinai and Synapses – an organization that bridges scientific and religious worlds. This week it featured a classic story attributed to Jewish Hasidic literature. You see there was a young boy who would wander around in the woods. His father got concerned as he went deeper and deeper into the forest

each time, so one day he said to the boy, “I notice that every day you walk into the woods. Why do you go there?”

The boy replied, “I go there to find God.” “That’s wonderful. But don’t you know that God is the same everywhere?” “Yes,” the boy answered, “but I am not.”¹

The commentary continues with a discussion of how we understand God being everywhere, but also God specifically dwelling in certain places. It ends with an example from neuroscience that gave me an aha moment. Rabbi Geoffrey Mitelman remarks on the necessity of “gaps” for communication with God. Communication in the brain is dependent on the space between neurons. Into this space neurochemicals are released, exciting or inhibiting the activity of other brain cells, muscles, glands or other targets.

Rabbi Mitelman points out that both the dwelling-place of God and the neural activity in our brain, the empty space in between is what allows for learning to happen. And he reminds us that empty space can be scary. “Vulnerability entails the potential to get hurt. Learning new ideas means our beliefs get challenged. We discover where we disagree with others. We see where we may have been wrong and where we have failed.” Yet we need the empty space.

This is where we find Jesus this morning - in the “empty space,” in the wilderness. He has been baptized, God the Father has declared “This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.” So you’d think that Jesus would be ready to get to work. To put on his best tunic, shine his sandals, load up his brief case, and hit the road. And yet scripture tells us “Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tested by the devil. He fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterward he was famished.”

Forty days and forty nights in the wilderness. Forty days and forty nights in the empty space. Forty days and forty nights of vulnerability. Forty days and forty nights to ponder about his life and wonder about the days ahead. Forty days and forty nights to prepare for the teaching and healing, the challenging of the authority and the work of restoration. In scripture we understand the designation of “40” to refer to a long time – forty years wandering in the wilderness for those freed from slavery in Egypt before entering the promised land. Forty years was a life span – a generation. Here was Jesus – in the wilderness for forty days and forty nights relying on the promise that God will always be with him and will never abandon him. Jesus was in the wilderness because he realized that while God is the same everywhere he, Jesus – in his humanity – is not.

A common misconception about our passage this morning is that Jesus spent forty days and forty nights being tempted – and we model our Lenten practices after that. This scripture is

¹Geoffrey Mitelman. *The Space in Between. Sinai and Synapses*. February 23, 2023. <https://sinaaiandsynapses.org/content/the-space-in-between/>

the traditional scripture for the first Sunday of Lent and the temptation for many is to focus on the temptations. After all, isn't Lent the season when you are supposed to "give up something" – to fast from something you enjoy and to see chocolate or beer or social media or as a temptation to distract you from a deepening relationship with God. We prepare for the deprivation of Lent by the excess of Mardi Gras – Fat Tuesday that precedes Ash Wednesday. As they say in Louisiana, *Laissez les bons temps rouler*, Let the Good Times Roll. And we celebrate the end of Lent with big Easter dinners and lots of chocolate. Lent is understood to be the season of deprivation – forty days and forty nights of resisting temptation. And yet what we hear in scripture is that it **was after** the forty days and forty nights in the wilderness that Jesus faced temptation.

Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tested by the devil. He fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterward he was famished. The tempter came and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread." But Jesus answered, "It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.' "

For Jesus the trial came after being in the wilderness for a long time. Jesus was tired and hungry and alone. And the tempter offers him an easy path to end the desolation he is feeling. If you really are the Son of God, you – you can turn the stones to bread, you can save yourself, you can have all the riches and splendor – you – you can do this on your own. And Jesus responds, "Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him. As one commentator notes, this story's central theme, then, far from heroic "self-reliance," is rather humble communion and trust in God. Indeed, the devil tempts Jesus *toward* "fortitude" and "self-sufficiency," at least as the world often defines them (sustain yourself, prove yourself, rule the world!). Jesus declines to pursue this path, testifying instead to his own "insufficiency" apart from God, the fountain of blessings at the center of his life."²

We have been walking in the wilderness for some time now – our own 40 days and 40 nights. On a societal level, we have experienced a wilderness of political divisiveness, a wilderness of privilege while others are oppressed, a wilderness of isolation and anxiety from a tiny virus, a wilderness of opioid addiction, a wilderness of self-harm and suicide, a wilderness from gun violence and threats of gun violence. And individually we have experienced our own unique wilderness episodes. Some of these may have been discrete and some have fuzzier boundaries.

We have a tendency to want to escape from the wilderness, to think that when we get to the other side of the wilderness everything will be easier, we will have the answers, the pain and the fear and the anxiety will be gone, all the holes in our hearts will be filled and there will be lots of chocolate to boot. We have a tendency – or at least I have a tendency – to think that the wilderness times – the struggles – are gaps – are holding pens to be avoided rather than

² <https://www.saltproject.org/progressive-christian-blog/trust-saltlectionary-commentary-lent-1-year-a>

looking at them as times of connection as Jesus did. Jesus' time in wilderness, the empty space, gave him time to focus on his relationship to God. Without competing demands for his attention and allegiance, Jesus could prepare himself for the challenges thrown at him by the tempter and say "Away with you, Satan! for it is written, 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.'" Jesus was now prepared to face the challenges from the religious authorities who questioned him. Jesus could face the crowds who pressed in on him seeking more and more from him. Jesus could face the betrayal by his disciple Judas, and Jesus could face the humiliation and pain of the cross. Jesus needed the empty space of the wilderness to prepare him and we need the empty space of wilderness to prepare us. We need the times when our hope is in the promise that God will always be with us and will never abandon us. We need that. We need that because we realize that while God is the same everywhere we are not.

Some of you may have seen reports in the news about a student chapel service which turned into a revival lasting 15 days at Asbury University in Wilmore, Kentucky. On February 8, after a regularly scheduled chapel service, a group of about 20 students lingered and began to worship and pray for one another. Over the course of two weeks, tens of thousands of others, students and non-students from across the religious spectrum joined in the gatherings, which were also streamed on the internet. Asbury University president Kevin Brown shared, "Never could I have imagined what we are experiencing now... 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."³

While not explicitly using wilderness language, many commentators have noted the challenges faced by those who sought sustenance through the revival. The Asbury revival is "marked by overwhelming peace for a generation marked by anxiety," said Madison Pierce, a student at the unaffiliated Asbury Theological Seminary across the street. "It's marked by joy for a generation marked by suicidal ideation," Mr. Pierce said. "It's marked by humility for a generation traumatized by the abuse of religious power."

I have read much commentary about this revival during the past two weeks, as those from all ends of the theological spectrum have sought to understand this outpouring of the Holy Spirit among the young faithful in rural Kentucky.

One of the most compelling commentaries came from Nadia Bolz-Weber, a Lutheran pastor and author from Denver. Rev. Bolz-Weber is from the decidedly progressive end of the spectrum, and to be honest she has engendered a fair amount of controversy over the years as she tells it like she sees it, sometimes with more colorful language than we are used to from the pulpit. As I was reading her commentary, I kept coming back to the wilderness. The wilderness we have all been living in, the wilderness young people especially are living in.

³ Ruth Graham. Woodstock' for Christians: Revival draws thousands to Kentucky town. *New York Times*. February 23, 2023. Published online at [ytimes.com/2023/02/23/us/kentucky-revival-asbury-university.html](https://www.nytimes.com/2023/02/23/us/kentucky-revival-asbury-university.html)

Bolz-Weber says about the prayer service and worship, “There is such a simplicity, and dare I say, a humility to it. I actually wonder if exhaustion from culture wars, purity codes and the idolatry of ideology on all sides have led these young people to seek revival in the simplicity of constant prayer and singing...” As she reflects on the commentaries about the revival, she remarks, “I have not always been prone to mixing sentimentality and religion. Irony and religion, fine, but this Gen Xer usually recoils from anything that smacks of sap. But here I am, longing to sing in that room with 1,000 other open-hearted people... There is something in my soul which longs for what I am seeing on these live-streams. Or what I *feel*/I am seeing. So rather than make big stroke proclamations about what the Asbury Revival is or is not, I’m trying to just pay attention to what longing inside of me is being drawn up in buckets each time I tune in.

I long to sing with others

I long to be open-hearted

I long to trust something for once

I long to be un-self-conscious in my devotion to God

I long to witness something real”⁴

I am with Rev. Bolz-Weber on these longings. You see there was a young boy who would wander around in the woods. His father got concerned as he went deeper and deeper into the forest each time, so one day he said to the boy, “I notice that every day you walk into the woods. Why do you go there?” The boy replied, “I go there to find God.” “That’s wonderful. But don’t you know that God is the same everywhere?” “Yes,” the boy answered, “but I am not.” We are not the same as we were last year during the Lenten season, or when we prepared for Christ’s birth in Advent or even last week. Our time in the wilderness shapes us, shapes our faith. We bring our longings before God, our longings to find God, our longings to be open-hearted and to trust something for once. We bring our longings to sing together and to pray together. May the longings of this Lenten season, whatever wilderness we find ourselves in, or whatever wilderness we have already transited, shape us be together as one body, the church, Christ’s body on earth. We affirm this belief by sharing together in the words of the Belhar Confession.

⁴ Nadia Bolz-Weber. On longing and the Asbury Revival. *The Corners*. February 19, 2023. <https://thecorners.substack.com/p/on-longing-and-the-asbury-revival>