

“Wilderness”

Rehab series. 1st Sunday in Lent

Matthew 4:1-17

[32] *Welcome. Prayer.*

[33] What is the most remote place you have ever visited? A few years ago, my family and I spent several days visiting Joshua Tree National Park in the Mojave Desert. We never journeyed more than a few hours away from our car, but we were still deep in the heart of sparse, unpopulated areas, with only some birds, jack rabbits, and a few lizards. We had to be careful each day to pack enough water and food to last, to bring maps, and know where we were going. The wilderness is beautiful, but it is also dangerous. The whole point of entering the wilderness is to leave civilization behind to experience something new, to come away with a new perspective.

[34] On this, the first Sunday in Lent, I am inviting you into a type of wilderness experience, through our sermon series “Rehab.”¹ You see, Lent is like spiritual training for the Christian. It is a time when we can enter a spiritual wilderness, removing excess from our lives and training ourselves in godly practices.

No one enters the wilderness easily. It is a lot like recovering from surgery. I had a hernia repaired once, and the first few days afterwards were awful. I went for a walk during the first 24-hours of recovery, and I basically staggered just to take 100 steps. It was a wilderness of recovery, healing scars and rebuilding muscles to regain full health.

[35] No one goes through rehab easily. If you have ever done physical therapy, you know it takes commitment, resolve, and belief in better days ahead to overcome the pain and hardship. You have to change your routine. You have to give up certain habits and start new ones. You have to change your diet and your exercise patterns. You have to believe in a greater purpose – getting healthy – in order to complete it.

[36] Jesus had his own physical and spiritual therapy in the Judean desert. Jesus went into the wilderness to “get away from it all.” Being away from

¹ Credit to <https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/worship/lent-2018-worship-planning-series> for the resources and ideas for this series.

distractions can help us get to the center of our thoughts and emotions. Forty days in the desert brought Jesus clarity of mind. Frankly, I’m amazed by his endurance. Jesus fasted for forty days. I certainly do not think clearly on an empty stomach.

The purpose of this scripture is not to prove Jesus was morally superior to the devil; this story shows us who Jesus is. Satan’s first two temptations begin with the phrase, “If you are the Son of God...” The devil was tempting Jesus to prove himself, use his power selfishly, instead of completing the wilderness journey with integrity.

Let’s look at the three wilderness tests individually.

[37] The first test is about priorities. The devil tempts Jesus to prematurely end his fast. *“If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread.”* (Matthew 4:3) The devil targets the human nature of Jesus. Hey, we all get hungry! However, Jesus could actually use his miraculous power to do something about it. The devil wants Jesus to cheat, just a little, on his diet.

We know from Colossians 1 all things were created for Christ and through Christ. Jesus made the soil, the sun, the rain, and the seed that is needed to produce bread. In his hunger and weakness, Jesus could abuse his power to make a snack.

[38] However, Jesus responds, *“One does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.”* (Matthew 4:4) Christ repels temptation with memorized scripture. Jesus resists instant gratification, because he is the Son of God. The Son of God is not impulsive; he is patient. Jesus has the power to transform stone into bread; later Jesus uses his power to feed 5,000 people with just five loaves and two fish. The difference is, that miracle appropriately gives honor to God; here in the desert, Jesus honors God by not misusing his divine power.

[39] The second temptation is all about trust. *“If you are the Son of God,” [the devil] said, “throw yourself down. For it is written:*

*“He will command his angels concerning you,
and they will lift you up in their hands,
so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.”* (Matthew 4:6)

In this second temptation, the devil attacks the heart of the relationship of Jesus and the God. Does Jesus trust God to save him? I find this temptation ironic, because later in his life, Jesus will lay down his life, on the cross, and God will save him and raise him back to life. But not here, not now. Jesus will not die recklessly. Jesus would only die with a purpose, in the proper place and time.

It may seem odd to us that Jesus would be tempted to prove he trusts God. How could the Son of God not trust the Father? Yet I think this temptation is common to all of us. Jesus shows us the way to properly love and trust God; not by foolishly placing ourselves in harm's way, but by loving and obeying God.

[40] Once again, Jesus is not fooled. And again he uses scripture to resist temptation: *“It is also written: ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’”* (Matthew 4:7) Jesus untwists the scriptures the devil uses, and instead applies them faithfully.

[41] The third and final temptation was about worship and purpose. The devil makes Jesus a final offer. At the top of a high mountain, the devil says, “Everything you see, I’ll give you, if you bow down and worship me.” (Matthew 4:9, my paraphrase.)

What is this test really about? All the kingdoms of the world rightfully belong to Jesus anyway. Jesus is King of Kings and Lord of Lords. The devil knows this. Instead, the devil tempts Jesus to take the easy way out. “Jesus, take a short cut. Don’t go to the cross. I’ll give up without a fight, if you worship me.”

[42] On this final test, Jesus actually sends the devil away. With each temptation, the devil raises the stakes, and now Jesus responds with passionate, righteous anger. *“Away from me, Satan! For it is written: ‘Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only.’”* (Matthew 4:10) For the third time, Jesus defeats temptation with memorized scripture.

[43] Jesus would not be deterred from his purpose. There are no shortcuts to salvation. Jesus’ one and only purpose was to reconcile humanity by his death on the cross. Jesus’ sacrificial act of obedience and worship of God is what brought us eternal life. And I love the fact that Jesus tells the devil off. James 4:7 says if we resist the devil, he will flee. It works for Jesus, and it will work for us, too.

[44] In three tests of priority, trust, and relationship with God, Jesus passes them all. This is great news for us! Look what happens when Jesus resists all these temptations and completes his forty days. “From that time on Jesus began to preach, ‘Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.’” (Matthew 4:17.) The parallel account in Luke 4:14 tell us, “Jesus returned to Galilee in the power of the Spirit.” The wilderness journey gave Jesus the power of the Spirit. Jesus not only proved he was the Son of God, Jesus claimed the power of the Holy Spirit to do the very miracles the devil had tempted, except now for the glory of God.

Jesus faced the wilderness and grew stronger in the Spirit. The same can happen to us. We all have a wilderness. “Wilderness represents those times in our lives when we begin to face, head on, our own brokenness.”²

[45] I have been out in the desert, literally and figuratively. Since graduating from college, I have changed careers, lived in two different countries, and battled depression. I have been unemployed, questioned my calling, and worried that I was not following God’s plan. I have spent time in counseling, read my Bible, had many sleepless nights and shed many tears, lost in the wilderness of my soul. Yet I will testify that every time I endured the wilderness and emerged, I felt God’s Spirit more closely than ever.

[46] The wilderness journey of Lent is a form of rehab for Christians. Whether or not we are literally dealing with addictions or illness, all of our souls need rehab. We all need spiritual exercise, activity that probably goes against our first nature. How often do we pray and fast? How often do we give up something easy and instantly satisfying in order to experience deeper growth? The point of this forty-day “program” is not just to complete it. Sure, if you want to give up chocolate for Lent, go ahead, but the real purpose of Lent is to establish new habits that last, that build up our faith.

[47] Historically, Lent served two purposes – it was a time of preparation for new Christians who would be baptized, and it was a time to restore those who had left the church. A serious manner, Lent was for screening those who would be followers of Christ. Today, Lent is a test for all of us, not just those seeking

² <https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/worship/lent-2018-worship-planning-series/february-18-2018-wilderness-first-sunday-in-lent/first-sunday-in-lent-2018-preaching-notes>

membership and baptism. It is a time of penitence, fasting, and self-inspection; a time of meditation on scripture, of being open and honest before God; a time to read Psalm 139 and say, *"Search me, God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me..."* (verses 23-24)

Rehab will not work if we take the easy way out. It only works if we stick to the program. We cannot journey through Lent without going into the wilderness of our souls. We must get away from excess; go to places that are deserted, untamed, unknown, and disorienting. Why? Because anxiety causes change. Comfort does not.

[48] So, are you willing to go into the desert? I promise, Jesus will go with you. After all, he's been there. If you are too comfortable, maybe you should let the Holy Spirit drive you to a new and unfamiliar place. Comfort will not make disciples of Christ. Commitment will.

The world is very broken. My heart aches for all those who have suffered tragedies, especially in the past year. We are in the desert of life! Yet I wonder, if more of us took this challenge seriously, to fast and pray and walk with Jesus, how many more people could we reach? How many troubled souls would we engage if we spent more time asking God to show us how walking through our deserts can empower us to help others?

My prayer is that we will enter the wilderness this Lent and do a serious examination of our lives. I pray that we confess our sin before God Almighty. I pray we will reconcile through awkward, uncomfortable, but necessary conversations. Yes, rehab is uncomfortable. It means stretching muscles that are atrophied, changing our habits, and avoiding those places where we are tempted. Just remember, Jesus was not required to go into the desert; yet he chose to go, to set the example for us. Jesus chose to obey the Spirit, uncomfortable as it was, because it was worth it. Our salvation was worth it.

[49] Spend some time in the desert these next seven weeks. Start a new habit. Read Psalm 51, or look at the Proverbs. Reflect on the words of the Apostle Paul in 1st Timothy 4:7-8: "...Train yourself to be godly. For physical training is of some value, but godliness has value for all things..."

There is a purpose for our wilderness journey, and I know without a doubt that God will see us through it. Let us all put our hope in the living God, the Savior and survivor of the wilderness, and watch him will do extraordinary things in our lives.

Memory Verse: 1st Timothy 4:7-8 (NIV)

“...Train yourself to be godly. For physical training is of some value, but godliness has value for all things...”

Reflection Questions:

1. Describe a time when you journeyed through the “wilderness.”
2. Which temptation of Jesus would have been the hardest for you?
3. Why is it important to focus on our need for forgiveness?
4. What one spiritual practice do you desire to strengthen?
5. How will you use the season of Lent to “get real” with God?