

**WILDERNESS TRIALS**  
A Sermon by Avena A. Ward  
St. Pauls United Church of Christ  
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**Text: Luke 4:1-13**

*Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, where for forty days he was tempted by the devil. He ate nothing at all during those days, and when they were over, he was famished. The devil said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread." Jesus answered him, "It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone.'"*

*Then the devil led him up and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. And the devil said to him, "To you I will give their glory and all this authority; for it has been given over to me, and I give it to anyone I please. If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours." Jesus answered him, "It is written,*

*'Worship the Lord your God,  
and serve only him.'"*

*Then the devil took him to Jerusalem, and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here, for it is written,*

*'He will command his angels concerning you,  
to protect you,'*

*and*

*'On their hands they will bear you up,  
so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.'"*

*Jesus answered him, "It is said, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'" When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time.*

**Sermon**

A seminary classmate named John Lionberger created a new type of ministry and had the moxie to ask to be ordained to it. John's ministry was to take burned-out clergy on Outward Bound type trips to get them inspired in the wilderness. John believed these trips would renew us so that we could come back to our churches ready for all the challenges that come up in the rounds of preaching and teaching, being present with families in times of crisis, and also monitoring the parking lot and making sure there are enough treats for coffee hour.

The idea sounded really good to me, but it took John a long time to convince the Church & Ministry Committee that “Renewal in the Wilderness” was an ordainable call to ministry. John saw Renewal as an opportunity to share his conviction that God is present with in the wilderness. But the ordination committee wanted him to support his belief with evidence from the scriptures.

Well, the scriptures for this morning for the first Sunday in Lent, provide that support. They tell us that Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness for 40 days. And he went from his wilderness experience directly into his ministry which led to the cross.

My friend John was able to use these biblical references as well as others to eventually convince the powers that be to ordain him. And a few years ago I talked my husband Tom into going with me on one of John’s early trips.

It was a short canoe trip on the Wisconsin River. John brought everything we needed – the canoes, the tents and the food. It was not very challenging except for that one afternoon when he dropped us off on an island and left us to our own devices for several hours with instructions to find a place to be alone. Really alone. Alone enough to hear what was going on in our heads and hearts. And perhaps even to hear what the Spirit was saying to us. We could write it down in our journals. But no cheating. No contact with others until he came to retrieve us.

I wandered on the island until I found a tree to lean against. It looked like a tree that had seen better days. It must have been struck by lightning at one time because it’s trunk was divided in two. And, although one side had leaves to shade me, the other side was barren and dying. On some level I was drawn to that tree because it spoke to the struggle in my own soul at the time.

Luke’s gospel says, Jesus was full of the Spirit after his baptism in the Jordan. Then the Spirit led him into the wilderness. At his baptism a voice had proclaimed Jesus Son of God. So Jesus went into the wilderness to pray and to explore who he was and how he would live out his identity. He went alone. And he ate nothing. So he was famished at the end of that time, as we can well imagine. Forty days and nights is a lot longer than most of us have the discipline to fast.

About four hours alone, without food, was all I could take on that wilderness trip. But since that trip, I’ve tried fasting on fruit and vegetable juice for up to four days, several times. And during those fasts I’ve tried to pay attention to what goes on inside me. What I notice is my perspective changes. After only drinking vegetable juice for three days I’m weak and also more inwardly focused. I don’t have the energy for conversations, especially if they’re the least bit controversial.

Luke’s gospel says Jesus met the devil for some controversial conversation at the end of a period of 40 days of fasting. Now I’ve heard tell, from those who have fasted for more than three days at a time, that there comes a time after a week or more when the mind achieves a state of clarity. A

time when the petty stuff falls away and what's important becomes crystal clear. That must have been the point at which Jesus was when the devil came to him.

So ... just who was this adversary Jesus met in the wilderness? Was it the winged, horned, pointy-tailed creature that made it's way into our imaginations through ancient Babylonian art? Was it a lispng serpent speaking Parseltongue? Was it a smooth talking, charismatic campaign organizer type offering an attractive strategic plan for Jesus' ministry? Or was simply a voice within Jesus' head? However we envision the devil, scholars agree that Jesus was facing an adversary who almost comes across as a "friend," one who offers things that sound perfectly reasonable and good. Whoever this devil was, he or she tempted Jesus with some really attractive options that all boiled down to one – the temptation to take the easy way out. This was a devil who not only offers attractive things but backs them up by quoting Scripture.

The devil used scripture to tempt Jesus – first – to take the easy way out of personal suffering. “If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread.” But Jesus countered that we do not live by bread alone. As a good Jewish boy steeped in the narratives of Exodus, Jesus knew that God would not let him starve. God had provided mana in the wilderness to nourish the Israelites. But then they grumbled and complained and it took 40 years in the wilderness to have them trust God.

After fasting and praying for 40 days Jesus was clear about God's purpose for his life. He easily rejected the devil's first offer. (What would it take for us to trust God so completely with our whole lives that we didn't worry about where our next meal comes from?)

When Jesus refused to turn stones into bread, the devil came back with another offer – take the easy way to power and control of the world. With the devil's help it would be easy to force God's kingdom upon the world. And – really – wouldn't it be great if Jesus ruled the world (instead of the hated Romans or any other “fill-in-the-blank”)? But the devil's way is to use “power over.” And God's way is to seek justice and show mercy and do it all with humility. God's way is through the heart, not through brute force. Jesus trusted that God would work through him to win hearts. So Jesus said “No” to the devil once again.

The third temptation came quickly after the second. The devil asks Jesus to come to the pinnacle of the temple and to throw himself off to see if God will send angels to save him. Here the devil quotes from the Psalm for the day (paraphrased in our call to worship) to remind Jesus of God's promise to save him from evening dashing a foot against a stone. If Jesus has the power to work miracles – and he does – this is very tempting. Just think – if the people witnessed this one amazing thing, early on in Jesus' ministry, perhaps there would be no need for the cross, right? But, again, Jesus simply says, “No.” And the devil leaves him alone – until an opportune time.

Luke bookends his gospel with wilderness temptation stories. The temptations that Jesus faces in the beginning of his ministry mirror the temptations that he will face again at the end of his life. So the devil will wait until he finds Jesus more vulnerable.

And Lent comes with an invitation to all of us to become aware of our vulnerability.

The reality is that we're all either now in some kind of wilderness – or we will be at some point in our lives. “[T]his is not a situation many of us seek,” according to Barbara Brown Taylor. “Most of us, in fact, spend a lot of time and money trying to stay out of [the wilderness]; but I don't know anyone who succeeds at that entirely – or forever. Sooner or later, every one of us will get to take our own wilderness exam, our own trip to the desert to discover who we really are” and whose we really are.<sup>1</sup>

This week has been an involuntary wilderness experience for a number of people in this congregation. We've lost two beloved members in one week. Anneliese Henninger, who lived a full life to the age of 86, and Orion Cowie, whose life ended suddenly at age 25. Anneliese was one of the last of our German-speakers. She had an outgoing and engaging personality. And through her work as a Connector she reached out to embrace many of us in our times of need. Many of you have gotten cards or phone calls from Anneliese at one time or another.

Orion Cowie spent many of his formative years here. In spite of muscular dystrophy that confined him to a wheelchair, he was a part of our church school and sang in the Joyful Sounds choir. Orion's outgoing personality and his wit – and sometimes even his provocative politics – drew people in. The double loss of Anneliese and Orion in one week leaves a big gaping hole, an emptiness that makes our wilderness more stark and inhospitable.

At the time I chose to go on that Renewal in the Wilderness trip our youngest child had just gone off to spend an exchange year in Europe, leaving another kind of hole. I was feeling empty as I contemplated my future. And so it wasn't surprising who showed up inside my head. It was that silver-tongued devil saying, “Now that your kids are both gone, you deserve to take it easy. Just let go and coast on into your golden years.” And I felt so comfortable with the invitation that I fell asleep right then and there.

When I awoke, I sat up and leaned my back against that tree – the one whose trunk was split in two with one side dying and the other side offering a full canopy of leaves that were shading me even then from the hot afternoon sun. Then it struck me that, although one part of the tree was dead, the other was thriving and still fully expressing its treeness. I said a prayer of gratitude for the lessons of the wilderness. And a funny thing happened. As my soul reached out to God in thanks, the devil disappeared – at least for the time being.

This year, as Lent begins some of us will not have chosen our wilderness. And some of us will take on Lenten disciplines to induce a state of wilderness. Some of us will be giving up the things we use to distract ourselves when we're hungry or lonely or bored or fearful. I know that, because I saw that several of my Friends have made a public declaration and signed off FACEBOOK for Lent. And that's great. It will give you a chance to see what you reach for when the devil comes to try you.

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<sup>1</sup>*The Wilderness Exam*, The Rev. Barbara Brown Taylor, TEC, from [www.day1.org](http://www.day1.org).

Barbara Brown Taylor offers advice to those of us in the Lenten wilderness. She says, “Stay there. [Don’t try to get out.] Remember to breathe – and say your prayers. You’ll get through the wilderness of Lent one day at a time.

“It would be a mistake for me to try to describe your wilderness trials. Only you can do that, because only you know what devils have your number, and what kinds of bribes they use to get you to [follow them]. All I know for sure is that a trip to the [wilderness] this Lent is a great way to practice getting free of those devils – not only because the wilderness is where you lose your appetite for things that cannot save you, but also because it is where you learn to trust the Spirit that led you there to lead you out again, ready to worship the Lord your God and serve no other all the days of your life.”<sup>2</sup>

Amen.

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<sup>2</sup>*The Wilderness Exam*, The Rev. Barbara Brown Taylor, TEC, from [www.day1.org](http://www.day1.org).