

Lent 2019
For God So Loved
Luke 4:1-13

1. Wilderness Refuge

- Luke 4:1-2; Deuteronomy 9:9

2. Wilderness Calling

- Luke 4:14-21, 3:38

3. Wilderness Temptation

- Luke 4:3-13

4. Wilderness Provision

- Luke 4:1--11; Mark 1:12-13

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Lent 2019: For God So Loved¹

Luke 4:1-13

Our middle son Ryan is quite the outdoorsman. He's a back-country split-boarder, rock climber, hiker, slack-line walker, and mountain climber. He's climbed Mt. Rainer, Mt. Adams, and a couple of fourteeners in Colorado. He likes to say that there are two types of outdoors people: there are Cabela's outdoors people, and then there are REI outdoors people. Ryan's an REI guy. How many of you fit that category? How many of you are Cabela's outdoors people? (Keep your hands up – Kelly, stand up. She's the manager! Maybe she'll give you a discount!).

I don't know which we are, but we have a little R-pod camper trailer with a slide out, and we really enjoy camping in it. So maybe we are "Camping World" outdoors people?

Whatever you are, there seem to be two types of people, though: those who love the wilderness, whether you are an REI person or a Cabela's person; and there are those who don't love the wilderness at all – who prefer a Hilton hotel with an indoor pool over a tent by a mountain stream. Some view the untamed wild as an opportunity for adventure, challenge, and exploration. Others view it as a beautiful sight to be viewed from the window of a condo, where you don't need to wear bug spray or worry about bears.

When we consider this passage for today that was read to us earlier about wilderness, we tend to bring along our preconceived notions and preferences about wilderness too: either it's a vast and beautiful wonder, or it's a challenging and desolate landscape to be viewed from a distance.

Wilderness for the Jews, though, would bring to mind a very different image. The image wouldn't be of camping, as much as one of *journeying*. It wouldn't be of picture windows in mountain condos, but of years looking out of tent flaps. For them, the idea of wilderness would bring up images of Moses and the Exodus.

If you remember the story, Moses first fled into the wilderness after killing an Egyptian who was beating a Hebrew slave. So the wilderness for Moses became a place of refuge – right up until the day he saw a burning bush. Suddenly the wilderness became a place of calling, a place where God spoke, and Moses was faced with the decision to answer. Then, out of the place of calling, the wilderness became once again a place of refuge, not just for Moses this time but also for the Hebrew people, who fled the oppression of the Egyptians.

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In that same wilderness God spoke once again, through the Ten Commandments, calling his people to be a people of covenant relationship with him and with one another. The wilderness also became a place of provision, where God miraculously fed the children of Israel with manna and quail, and where water poured from rocks. This wild and untamed wilderness in the Exodus story was not just a place of refuge, of calling, and of provision. It was also a place of great temptation.

Around every corner the children of Israel were tempted to forsake the God who was performing all these miracles for them. They built statues to worship, they grumbled and complained about the food, they complained about the water. Then finally, when they were told to move in and take the Promised Land, they fell into the temptation of not trusting God, and they were forced to wander in the wilderness for forty years.

The next forty years for the Israelites were of temptation and trial, of hope and promise, and are what we see reflected in these forty days of Jesus's wilderness journey. It is a time when Jesus too finds refuge, calling, temptation, and provision in the midst of the wild, but this was to create a permanent Promised Land in God's Kingdom.

How many of us would say that we've had times that we've felt like we were in the wilderness? How many of us feel like we are in the wilderness right now? How many of us know that there will be wilderness times ahead for us? Seems like that covers all of us, doesn't it? So let's look at this story from the life of Jesus, and learn about our own journey with Jesus in this season of Lent, and about our own wilderness experiences, as we approach our Easter celebration together in about five weeks.

Starting with...

1. Wilderness *Refuge*

Let's start by putting this passage in some context. In chapter 3 we read about John the Baptist, who is described as a wild man who lives in the wilderness and talks about himself as one coming to prepare the way. The image is of crooked paths being made straight.

So here's our first clue: wilderness, then, is not something to be avoided but, rather, is something that Christ enters into. If Jesus walked into wilderness, then we can too. In fact, Jesus not only walks with us into our wilderness times, if we follow him, he will likely lead us into wilderness times. So there must be some good in the wilderness for us. And that means then that wilderness is not just a place of barrenness; it is also a place of promise; there is hope in it, and good things to get out of it. Look again at the first verse of this passage:

"Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, left the Jordan and was led by the Spirit into the wilderness..." (Luke 4:1, niv)

The Holy Spirit is the one who leads Jesus into the wilderness. Jesus enters into the wilderness in the company of the Trinity; he is the Son; the Father is with him and the Spirit is leading him. He never enters wilderness alone. Christian: neither do you.

And then we see that Jesus fasts for forty days while in the wilderness:

“...where for forty days he was tempted by the devil. He ate nothing during those days, and at the end of them he was hungry.” (Luke 4:2, niv)

How many days? There’s something important there: Moses wrote this about his time on the mountain with God:

“When I went up on the mountain to receive the tablets of stone, the tablets of the covenant that the Lord had made with you, I stayed on the mountain forty days and forty nights; I ate no bread and drank no water.” (Deuteronomy 9:9, niv)

Moses fasted for 40 days and nights as he prepared for God to give him the revelation of the Ten Commandments on the stone tablets.

Part of the reason we encourage fasting of some sort during the 40-day season of Lent is because we want to position ourselves to be able to better receive from God whatever he has for us. Some of us fast from sweets, some from coffee, some from other things like social media. That’s because, in the Old Testament, fasting was often preparation for divine revelation.

I don’t know if you’ve ever practiced fasting for spiritual reasons, but this is a good season to try some kind of fasting.

I hope you see that the fasting of Moses and Jesus parallel each other in such a way that it is clear that Jesus’ wilderness time is a time of preparation for a divine revelation.

And also, like Moses and Jesus, we can find refuge in the wilderness. There are times in our lives that we are led into wild places. Our natural tendency is to usually resist these places, but the life of Jesus and the season of Lent teach us that they can be times of refuge and formation.

As we lean into Lent, these forty days are days of refuge and reformation for us – a time to remove ourselves from the chaos of the world and prepare ourselves for divine revelation in our lives.

Second, I want you to see that it is also a time of...

2. Wilderness *Calling*

Within the context of all of Luke chapter four, it is clear that Jesus is being led into public ministry through this time in the wilderness.

After Jesus comes out of the wilderness in chapter four, we’re told that Jesus declares that the Spirit of the Lord is upon him to preach:

“Jesus returned to Galilee in the power of the Spirit, and news about him spread through the whole countryside. He was teaching in their synagogues, and everyone praised him. He went to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, and on the Sabbath day he went into the synagogue, as was his custom. He stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was handed to him. Unrolling it, he found the place where it is written: ‘The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.’

Then he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant and sat down. The eyes of everyone in the synagogue were fastened on him. He began by saying to them, “Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.” (Luke 4:14-21, niv)

So it’s clear that Jesus’ time in the wilderness was a time of calling. What’s interesting is that in the wilderness, Jesus faced all those temptations as part of his refuge and calling.

In a moment we’ll take a closer look at all of the temptations that he faced. But what’s important here is that, in the midst of the temptations, who Jesus is, and his calling is being reconfirmed.

Of the three temptations that Satan brought on Jesus, two questioned whether or not Jesus really was the Son of God, and the other asked him to give up his place as the Son of God.

In the verse right before chapter four starts – the last verse of chapter three (Luke 3:38), it affirms that Jesus is the Son of God – the end of a list of Jesus’ lineage. It is *that* identity that Satan attempts to tear down. I’ll tell you, Satan, who is also called the Accuser and the Father of Lies, will always attack *our* identity in Christ – in every temptation; there is an attempt to get you and me to think that we are less than what we are in Christ.

But in the temptations, Jesus never denies that he is the Son of God; rather, he reiterates that he is a humble servant devoted to the worship and service of God.

When you and I are in the wilderness, rather than give in to temptation, we can realize it reaffirms and strengthens who we are in Christ. We can find our call in the wilderness.

Just like we are brought back to images of Moses being called to free the children of Israel, we see Jesus called into the desert by the Holy Spirit, called to set us free forever.

In this season of Lent, we also prepare ourselves to hear the call of God in our lives. During these forty days, God might be calling you to speak freedom to others – to introduce people to Jesus Christ. He might call you to pray for and invite your unchurched friends to join you on Easter.

Or you may find God calling you to trust the Holy Spirit in some deeper way. Though it might not be through a burning bush, or days of temptation, be open to where calling might happen in the midst of these days.

Third, and I told you we'd look at this a little more deeply, is...

3. Wilderness Temptation

Jesus is tempted in the wilderness. (Luke 4:3-13) This might be the most obvious role of the wilderness: Jesus is there to be tempted.

He is hungry; he is tempted to meet immediate felt needs on his own and in his own way, by turning stones to bread. Not only that, he is in the middle of a country that often suffers from famines. Surrounded by rocks and boulders all around him – as many as sands on the beach – he is tempted to take the short cut and feed the people living around him in that time. But he understands that there is more to life than just food.

He is tempted to succumb to celebrity and authority; he is tempted to stop worshipping God, to lower his sights and worship this world in exchange for notoriety and temporary authority. But Jesus understands that God alone is the one owed all glory and honor.

Satan attempts to trick Jesus by then tempting Jesus to succumb to power, by quoting Scripture, but he takes Scripture out of context. He does this by tempting Jesus to give in to the miraculous and throw himself off a building so that God will catch him. Let me tell you – sometimes we look for the miraculous as a way out, testing God to “prove us right” in the eyes of people; we want God to validate our “power.” But Jesus understands that we should not test God and instead should trust in the power of God alone, no matter what – especially, and often because there is no apparent miracle.

We too will face temptation in the wilderness.

Lent is a season of facing things that tempt us. So that's why we participate in fasting from things we enjoy in order to draw closer to God. Things like sweets or coffee help us understand our propensity to fall to temptation instead of trusting God.

We can learn to stand firm against temptation through the power of Christ. One of the ways we do that is through knowledge of Scripture, just like Jesus knew the Scriptures to stand against temptation. So we use Lent as a time to draw us closer to God's Word. That's why we are going through this Lenten devotional together. I'd encourage you to pick up a copy – only \$8 from us (that's cheaper than Amazon! If you can't afford it, let us know), or you can simply read the Scripture passages for each day on the reading plan and in our app.

Finally, I want us to see that this is a time of...

4. Wilderness Provision

This story is also found in Matthew (4:1-11) and in Mark (1:12-13), and in the parallel passage in the Gospel of Matthew, it says that the angels attended Jesus after the devil left. The important thing to remember here is that in the midst of the wilderness, Jesus's needs were met.

Once again, this compares to the needs of the children of Israel in the wilderness; they did not need to leave the wilderness to be cared for – God cared for them *even in the midst of the wilderness*.

Jesus was given strength and words and the right thoughts in the midst of his temptations; the Holy Spirit continued to be present with Jesus, providing for him even in the midst of the hardest temptations.

When we are facing our wilderness times, we too can find provision in the wilderness. God has not forgotten you, God is with you, and God will provide for you.

We often think of the wilderness as a wasteland, but we are reminded through this text that God does not abandon us even in the midst of the wilderness. When we are faithful to seek after God, we might discover during this season of Lent that God provides for us in ways we don't always recognize in our day to day.

Years ago I was the youth pastor at College Church of the Nazarene on the Campus of Northwest Nazarene University. It was a great time, but it was an incredibly difficult time in our lives. We had moved there from a very painful situation after being in another church for over seven years, and we had kind of gotten chewed up by some people we thought were close friends. So we went there a little wounded. Then, right after we got there, our youngest son, Brenden, became seriously ill at only the age of one, with the older two not even in school yet. We spent the next three years not knowing for sure if Brenden was going to live or die or even what was killing him, with Shelly and the boys taking month long trips to Denver children's hospital for testing and treatment. I wasn't allowed the time off to be with my family. I'll be honest with you; it was one of the toughest places to work. I had a boss and people in the church who were pretty demanding and not very compassionate with what we were going through. Not to mention that I was in the middle of getting my first master's degree. It was incredibly stressful.

Has anyone been to Nampa? You know that, especially back at that time, the town usually smelled really bad. To the north was the sugar beet factory. Not a good smell. To the east was the cattle slaughter house. Also, not a good smell. To the south was the landfill. So depending on which way the wind was blowing, you had a 75% chance of a terrible odor in the air. You could tell which way the wind blew by the smell. I would step out onto my front porch in the morning, take a breath to start my day, and would literally say out loud, "This place stinks!!" Even geographically it felt like that; I had grown up in the green lush forest country of Salem, Oregon, in the heart of the Willamette Valley. Nampa was all brown, all the time. When we flew into Boise, our son Sean, who was four, looked out the window at Nampa as we flew over and said, "Dad, this looks like doo-doo land!"

It was during that time that one of mentors, Rev. Norm Shoemaker, happened to be on campus for some meetings, and he and I got together for coffee. He asked me how I was doing. I said, "Everything stinks right now."

But he said this to me, and I'll never forget it: he said, "Mike, do you feel like you are in the wilderness?" I said, "Yeah, that's a great description of it." It really felt like wilderness, and I agreed with Norm. Then he said, "Here's the problem, Mike. Whenever we are in the wilderness, we think it is punishment. But if you look at every wilderness story in the Bible, you'll see that God uses it for *preparation*. God is *preparing* you for greater things. So you can sit in the wilderness, be depressed, and complain. Or you can step into the Spirit's leading, learn your lessons, stay in the refuge and listen to the calling and allow God's provision even in temptation. Then, you'll see that God will use it to prepare you for even greater things."

So from then on, I did the best I could to step out on my porch and say, "Thank you Jesus. Spirit lead me so that I'll be fully prepared." Eventually God healed Brenden, and then I became lead pastor at another church, and some of the folks at College Church are our dearest friends.

What ways is God providing for you in the midst of your wilderness? He will do it in order to prepare you for even greater things.

The wilderness cannot be avoided, as much as we might try. We will find ourselves in the midst of the wild and untamed expanses of life at one time or another. The temptation is to avoid them, or to view them as places where nothing good can happen, but the wilderness can be a place of growth. It can be a place where we are restored, challenged, and called, and it can even be a time to see the provisions of God in the midst of scarcity. As a people, let's walk into this time of Lenten wilderness with the expectation that God is going to walk with us through it all, preparing us to better share the Gospel with others, introducing them to Jesus Christ.

Pray