

## 2020 01 19 Matthew 4:1-17 SERMON: Period of Preparation

Anyone been in the wilderness? Anyone there now? A deserted and lonely place? A place of desolation? A deep, dark valley with no seen way out? Some purposely make such journeys. Like Gage, our likely Eagle scout candidate, who relishes such challenges in physical wilderness areas. But even more important are spiritual wilderness journeys, which, though extremely treacherous and grueling, are opportunities for incredible spiritual growth.

However, sometimes we are completely unaware of the journey, until we are smack in the middle of the wilderness, leaving us bewildered and confused. Perhaps we have been plunged into an incredibly painful situation. Loss of job. Loss of relationship. Loss of health. Loss of mental health. Before coming here as your pastor, I heard, though different words were used, that FPCP was in the midst of a wilderness period, so I needed to concentrate on pastoral care, which I did, to help bring us “out of the woods,” so to speak. Last week’s celebration of 10 new members standing before us seemed a sign of the wilderness being behind us.

So, it may seem strange that I am preaching these sermon texts today. But, in the lectionary, the wilderness passage immediately follows Baptism of the Lord Sunday, which was just last week. Why? Because wilderness journeys often follow a period of new empowerment and spiritual growth. Remember that Jesus was driven into the wilderness immediately after his anointing by the Holy Spirit at his baptism. Now Jesus, perfectly in tune with the Father, seemed to know ahead. To prepare for the preparation, he voluntarily went into a period of deep prayer. He submitted to fasting for 40 days to better be able to distinguish the voice of the Father, in order to know what God planned next for him. Jesus also knew that he was led by the Holy Spirit into the wilderness. We, like Jesus following his baptism, too, might be driven into periods of preparation by the Spirit.

But whether we intentionally go into the wilderness following a leading of the Spirit or are unwittingly driven there, the experience of confusion and bewilderment is still the same. Either way, we must seek God. We must ask God: “Where am I? What are you doing? Are you driving me into the wilderness?”

There is a general purpose to the wilderness, a purpose of preparation, of spiritual growth. That purpose is ultimately surrendering further to God’s deep love. For only God’s love can keep us grounded in the chaos of the wilderness. First, always wear God’s love as an outer garment of protection to weather the storms. Pray on the armor; be constant in prayer.

Second, remain in Christ by remaining in the Word of God. This is how Jesus survived and discerned the deception of the enemy in the terrible wilderness. By living constantly in the Father’s love and God’s word before going, Jesus was able to withstand the wilderness and Satan who was there. In confirmation class we dove into the wilderness of today’s passage. Our own wilderness wanderer Gage expressed how the word of God was like Jesus’ Geiger counter, his decepto-meter, able to accurately discern the deception of the enemy, who even attempted to “use” the Word of God wrongly against Jesus, focusing on angels instead of God

Most High, trying to trick Jesus in turning away from worshiping God only. Remaining in the Word of God is crucial in the wilderness. In the armor of Ephesians 6, the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God, is the only offensive weapon against the devil! Do not fail to carry the Word of God locked in our hearts and minds into the wilderness. A paper Bible is not helpful while riding raging rapids, for example. The word is a crucial tool in our survival kit.

Third, don't panic. Get medical help if needed, but resist the temptation to flee: to get a new job, move to a new place, buy a new toy, take up a new hobby, or find a new distraction. To flee is to be distracted from God's intended work that he has started in us and that he intends to complete. Resist the temptation to flee. It is the devil that we are told to resist. Then he will flee.

Finally, submit to God also through the counsel of a small counsel of wise and mature friends who will hold you accountable and be honest. For it is not good to be isolated from the Body of Christ. Do not leave your community of faith behind. Stay connected.

Also realize that there is often a purpose and preparation for a plan that may not be immediately known. God is silent in the wilderness. No answer comes. We wait in silence. But as Corrie Ten Boon once said, "It is not difficult to trust an unknown future to a known God." That's why the desire to know God comes before knowing his plan for us. And what if we have to decide before we have an answer? Then we must act, based upon what we do know of God and his word, and trust that God loves us and will care for us, by grace forgiving us if we are wrong.

In order, to practice for such periods of silence, as Jesus voluntarily retreated to lonely places for prayer, shouldn't we, who are far less perfect and holy, do the same? When is our next planned wilderness retreat in order to listen for God's direction? And what should we expect when we go? We should, of course, seek to hear from God, but should expect also to hear from 3 competing voices: the voice of darkness, the voice of pressure from other people, and most of all the voice of our own emotions. Therefore, anything we hear must be tested, held up against Scripture, for the only voice that can be fully trusted is that of God's.

Obviously, we cannot trust the voice of darkness. Satan is a liar. But as the deceiver, he tries to trick us into thinking that his voice is that of God's. He doesn't show up and introduce himself, "Hi, I'm Satan, follow me." He tries to make us think, as he tried to make Jesus think, that he is God or at least a good angel or friend. He will "do good" as part of the trick. "You're hungry. Go ahead. Turn these stones into bread." Or "I'll take care of you. You'll lack for nothing, let alone food. Throw yourself down. You'll see that I'll catch you." When I prayed with people in other countries, who knowingly entered alliances with Satan, he had a terrible hold on them, because he convinced them that he did good things for them, and he did! But for a terrible price that the persons couldn't detect. The price of fear, desires, dissension, and other acts of the flesh in Galatians 5:19-21. This is why before being able to hear the voice of God, there needs to be willing submission, conviction of sin, confession, and repentance. That is why we have a prayer of confession before hearing the word and receiving

baptism or communion. But whether Satan and his followers like it or not, his commander and chief and ours is the Lord. Satan was created to serve God, and God employs him to test us, just as with Jesus in the wilderness. Albeit Satan goes rogue and disguises himself as God, he is not God. He is one of God's workers and is to report to the Lord God. But his attempts to trick Jesus who truly knows God and God's word failed. If we know God and God's word, Satan's attempts over us should fail, too. But Satan hides his attempts behind influencing others.

The others that Satan hides behind are those who influence our lives: those whom we love: family and friends and those to whom we look up or have authority. As a result, our desire to please people or at least not to offend people often supersedes our desire to please and not to offend God. In other words, we raise other people above God. Further, the influence of others and their words, influence our thoughts and actions, even subtly replacing the voice of God in our own minds.

The final voice is our own. Ignatius of Loyola, who ministered in Spain during the period of the Reformation in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, developed prayer exercises and rules for discerning spirits. In his 14<sup>th</sup> rule, he describes how an enemy in battle seeks to discover the weakest point in order to strike there. Such is the case with Satan. He attacked at the point of Jesus' hunger and next at his need for safety. But the sword of the Spirit, the word of God, is necessary, because as a means of tricking us the enemy lays before us options other than our obedience to God's word.

Therefore, a wilderness period for us is preparation for God's plan in our lives by instructing us to take up the helmet of salvation (Ephesians 6:17) and holding every thought captive (2Cor 10:5). The wilderness gives opportunity for renewing our minds (Romans 12:2) and making us like minded with Christ (Philippians 2:5). The point of the wilderness period is to strip away any parts of ourselves that are not of God and not of our "true" self, by plunging us into the Holy Spirit's refining fire of God's best love. There's an expression that I keep hearing over and over again nowadays, challenging us to live "our best life." But "our" best is not ours, it is God's plan for us. And what is best for us is to submit our lives to God. That is the purpose of a wilderness period. Note not "the" wilderness, but "a" wilderness. There are more than one wilderness periods in life. Why? If God did all the prep at once, we as weak mortals could not withstand.

But know that ultimately the purpose of a wilderness period is to more fully receive God's love, in order for us to more fully love with Christ's love. Love means sacrifice; love is risky and dangerous. But, by this love, God's perfect love, the world will know that we are followers of Jesus, going into the wilderness for the sake of the kingdom, just as he did. In the grace of God, covered in his love, holding fast to his word, propelled by prayer, let us go. Let us go into the future, wildernesses and all, that God has planned for us. Let us be led, like Jesus, by the Holy Spirit to fulfill the Father's plan. Amen.