

March 1, 2020 | Journey worship service

TEXT: [Luke 4:1–11](#)

THEME: Giving Up

By the Rev. Heather Schoenewolf

I remember the first lie I told on purpose. I was about 5 years old. It was a Sunday afternoon, and we were at my grandparents' house for a chicken soup lunch after church. My pap sat at his spot on the loveseat watching a football game while the rest of our family lingered over the soup. I wanted potato chips. So I went and asked my Pap if he could get me some chips. He did what a good grandfather would do- and said "ask your Dad." I did, and Dad said "no." So I marched back into the living room and told Pap that it was OK. I neglected to calculate that we would have to walk through the dining room to get to the cupboard in the kitchen that held the chips, and as Pap and I headed to the kitchen my Dad figured out what had happened. Needless to say, I was busted...and you might want to play poker against me sometime. I'm not the most successful liar.

We all have moments in our lives where we want something—like REALLY want something—and our desire for that something takes over. For King David, it was Bathsheba bathing on a neighboring roof. For Judas, it was 30 pieces of silver. For Peter, it was his sense of safety. We are tempted by these somethings. Our minds start an inner dialogue to justify why we need what we want or deserve what we want—or why we're truly better off with it. We feed the temptation and give it strength until it has power over us—the power to make us do things that aren't US; sometimes, even, the power to make us do things we'll regret.

Now I'm pretty sure that Bathsheba did not call to King David from the rooftop as she bathed. Most of the time the thoughts that tempt us are just that—thoughts. They are generated in our own minds and hearts. They stir up our desires. They feed our wants. These thoughts try to convince us that it is OK to laugh at someone else's expense or that our security is at risk if we surrender some of our own privilege, or that we absolutely must purchase the green lined frying pan if we want to eat the best omelet. Yes, there are voices outside of our heads that fuel these fires: there are commercials and tweets and conversations with those we value. And, in Jesus' case, there is the Devil.

As we begin our 40-day Lenten journey toward Easter, we hear the story of Jesus' forty days and forty nights in the wilderness. This text appears in all three synoptic gospels, but Mark's version just gives us two sentences. Matthew and Luke flesh out this story for us, and tell us how, just after his baptism, Jesus is sent by the Holy Spirit to the wilderness to fast and pray. Then the Devil shows up. Just when Jesus is ready to go home and get some food, the Devil shows up to try to convince him that he's be better off turning stones to bread, taking command of the worlds kingdoms, or invoking angels

to save him from a deadly fall off a cliff. The Devil uses scripture to try to convince Jesus to take the easy way out—to use the divine power at his disposal to make things different, less challenging, *less human*.

Some commentators and theologians look at the temptations in the wilderness and make a connection to our lives today. Henri Nouwen offers a beautiful book on Christian Leadership in which he looks at these temptations and summarizes them as *The need to be relevant; the need to be liked; the need to be powerful*.

Others note that it is the need to do the miraculous, to dazzle with spectacle; to earn political power...

The bottom line is that the Devil is trying to lure Jesus with the ways of the world, to see if he might be distracted from his mission.

In many ways it appears as though this conversation with Satan is Jesus' final exam before graduating in the world of life-saving ministry. We know that this ministry will not be easy: His friends and his family will reject him. His neighbors will try to kill him, his fellowship of faith will reject him, his friend will betray him. In fact, he will die an unjust and painful death on a cross. Jesus needed time to get ready, to be prepared for what would lie ahead. And so we read that the Holy Spirit led him to the desert—not just to fast or to pray—but to be tempted, we are told. Here in the wilderness he undergoes an unlikely and difficult training where he can affirm that he is sure of who he is and whose he is.

BBT:

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 what our lives are really about.

I guess that could sound like bad news, but I don't think it is. I think it is good news—because even if no one ever wants to go there, and even if those of us who end up there want out again as soon as possible, the wilderness is still one of the most reality-based, spirit-filled, life-changing places a person can be. Take Jesus for instance

- How did he end up there? The Spirit led him.
- What was he full of? He was full of the Holy Spirit.
- What else did he live on? Nothing.
- How long was he there? Weeks and weeks.
- How did he feel at the end? He was famished.
- What did that long famishing stretch in the wilderness do to him? It freed him—from all devilish attempts to distract him from his true purpose, from hungry craving for things with no power to give him life, from any illusion he might have had that God would make his choices for him. After forty days in the wilderness, Jesus had not only learned to manage his appetites; he had also learned to trust

the Spirit that had led him there to lead him out again, with the kind of clarity and grit he could not have found elsewhere.¹

Perhaps this is why we go to the wilderness each year. Yes, life draws us into wilderness wanderings not of our own making—months of chemo; walking with a child through rehab; tensions at work. But Lent invites us to go to the wilderness on purpose that we too might lean on the Spirit. That we might better learn to differentiate our authentic needs from the mass marketing of the world; that we might find the courage to say “no;” that we might trust that we belong to God.

So maybe I should give up potato chips for Lent, for if I give up the treat I desire I might also eradicate the temptation for it. But maybe I should slow down. Maybe I should listen for the Spirit’s leading—trusting that the same Spirit that led Jesus into the wilderness and back out again is with US too. Maybe I should stop trying to fix everything, trying to be “the” best, and rather focus on who I am in Christ.

There is no prescription for Lenten success. There is no one right way to embark upon the Journey. But remember: you do not go alone. We’re in this together. And the Holy Spirit goes before you.

God has got you.

Thanks be to God.

¹ https://day1.org/weekly-broadcast/5d9b820ef71918cdf2002924/the_wilderness_exam