

“Wilderness Trust”

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First Presbyterian Church
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Old Testament Lesson – Psalm 119:105-112 New Testament Lesson - Luke 4:1-13

The story goes that a village in China was suffering a long and devastating drought. The people went through their usual rituals and incantations to bring the rain, but nothing seemed to work. Finally, a group of village elders sent for a famous rainmaker who lived many miles away. They waited anxiously for his arrival.

It was days before they saw anyone approaching the village, but finally on the horizon they saw two men carrying an old, shriveled man on a modest litter. They brought him into the village and set him down. The little man got down out of his litter, looked around and sniffed. The elders came to him and said, “What can we do for you?” The old man said, “I will need a little house out of town where I can be by myself in silence.”

So they gave him a house, and he went there by himself. Hours went by – two hours, three hours. In the third hour, it began to sprinkle, then it began to rain, then it began to pour. Crops that had been parched were now fed. Seeds that had not germinated were given new life.

The people went to him and said, “What did you do?” You see, they thought he would come down into their village and perform public rituals and incantations. But the old man answer them, saying “When I came into your village, all I could feel was contention, chaos and resentment. I had to get away to pray and to be in touch with God.”¹

Today is the first Sunday in Lenten, the days leading up to Easter during which we seek to get away, and pray, to be in touch with God. But sadly for many of us – for all of us – our lives are a lot like that Chinese village, full of contention, chaos and resentment. We all have areas of our lives that are in need of God’s spiritual rains that can bring new life. And we would all love to have God come in and work a miracle, but we can’t figure out how to make that happen. And of course, it’s really not a matter of us making it happen, but rather letting it happen – letting God into our lives in such a way that the

¹ Based on a story retold by Carl Jung, who attributes it to his friend Richard Wilhelm.

miracles show up, often unexpectedly, if we're truly turning our lives over to God, trusting God to show us what to do next.

Turning our lives over to God can be a very difficult thing to do – simple, but difficult. It's simple because it doesn't require a lot of deep Bible study, or arduous service work, or any complicated rituals done just so. And it's difficult, difficult because, what it does require, is for us to actually make room for God in our otherwise crowded and chaotic lives.

In our New Testament lesson, Jesus has just emerged from the waters of the Jordan River after his baptism. As Luke tells us, Jesus is full of the Holy Spirit and ready to begin his ministry. And the first thing that God does is lead him out into the wilderness. The wilderness is where we come to really know ourselves – our strengths and our limitations. It's where we come to know God – come to know a guidance and protection and provision that come from outside of ourselves. And the wilderness is where we come to know what Luke calls the devil – temptation – all those things we think we want, think we need to get by in life, the things we think we just have to have to be safe and secure and successful.

Only by facing head on our worries and fears, our wants and our needs, and not giving into the impulse to run in and fix things ourselves, only by trusting in God can we come to know what God is capable of doing in our lives.

A Chinese village facing extreme drought finds out that none of their rituals and incarnations none of their usual ways of responding can bring life-giving rain. So they turn outward, certain that there's someone, somewhere in the world who can do the trick. And it turns out all they needed to do was to draw closer to God.

Often, when our lives are in a drought – when we get really hungry, or there's just no peace and quite, or our job isn't fulfilling, we feel like we have no friends, there's no "love of our life" – when our lives have ground to halt, we tend to turn outward expecting the world to fill the void, to get us going again.

And sometimes it does, and sometimes it doesn't. When the world fails to fulfill our needs it's because we're asking something of the world it was never designed to provide. There are some needs that only God can fulfill. That's what we learn in the wilderness. But to really learn that, and to put that knowledge to work for us, we have to step out into the wilderness. Stop looking for quick fixes and to trust in God.

During his wilderness experience, Jesus showed that he trusts in God with all his heart, and soul, and mind. We see the extent of Jesus' faith in God not in his first temptation, when Jesus trusted he could go another day without bread, but in his third temptation. In the third temptation, Jesus shows an unquestioning faith in God.

In this ultimate temptation, Luke tells us, the devil "placed (Jesus) 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." And Jesus answers him, saying, "It is said, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'" Jesus trusted God unquestioningly.

Do you? I don't know; don't we more often put God to the test? And yet perhaps we'd do better if we would just realize that it's actually we who are tested in life?

Life is a constant struggle, for all of us. Even the richest and most powerful people struggle to get it right. And in the midst of it, God uses our struggles to prepare us for what's next, what's to come in life. We can either learn and grow by trusting in God, or continue trying to live life on our terms and end up destined to continually repeat the life's lessons.

A college sophomore spent the entire semester fretting "in anticipation of the notoriously difficult final exam in his ornithology class (that's birds). Having made what he regards as the ultimate effort, the student is stunned when he walks into the classroom to take the exam. There is no test paper, no multiple-choice questions – just 25 pictures on the wall. And they are not photos of birds in resplendent color, but pictures of birds' feet. The test is to identify the birds. "This is insane," the student protests. "It can't be done." "It must be done," says the professor. "This is the final." "I won't do it," says the boy. "I'm walking out." "If you walk out, you fail the final." "Go ahead and fail me," says the boy, heading for the door. "Okay, you have failed. Tell me your name," the professor demands. So the boy rolls his pants up and takes his shoes off, (and pointing to his feet, says,) "You tell me!"²

That story is found in a book by John Ortberg titled "The Life You've Always Wanted." Ortberg goes on to say that "a test is a difficult experience through which a person's true values, commitments and beliefs are revealed."

² The Life You've Always Wanted (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan Publishing House, 1997), 209-210.

We learned something about the true values, commitments and beliefs of both the student and the professor in Ortberg's story. And we learn something about Jesus' true values, commitments and beliefs in the story of his test – his temptation.

But because Jesus' trust in God is unquestioning, he can withstand all manner of worldly temptations. The devil shows him all the kingdoms of the world and (says) , "To you I will give their glory and all this authority." But Jesus knows that taking control for himself instead of relying on God to guide and equip him only brings trouble.

If we look at the troubling areas of our lives – in our jobs, or competing in school or in sports, or even in our driving around out on the roadways – we see that seizing control and forcing our way along only leads to clashes and crashes; somebody always gets hurt, or we get frustrated or we lose hope because things don't work out our way. So really this is an opportunity for us to learn the value of having it God's way, to learn to trust in God; that God will take care of the situation; that we don't have to force our will on things.

Even with the simple things of life, Jesus shows us that God's way is the better way. When he was tempted by hunger – extreme, physical hunger – Jesus could have easily turned that stone into bread. That's child's play for some who goes on to turn water into wine, multiply the fish and the loaves, and even raise the dead. It's child's play, but it's not God's way. Turning stones into bread? That's just doing things our way, forcing our will on the situation, rather than trusting in God to provide.

When we're facing hunger or simple deprivation – just not having what we want when we want it – Jesus shows us that we can trust in God, even for the little things, like getting something to eat. Yet try going without – just skipping your normal mealtime one or two days a week – and see how quickly we start to panic. Try it – skip some meals this Lent – or give up something else you're really used to having – and then trust in God to get you through it.

And as for the big things, like having control over our own lives, Jesus was offered the title and power of King of the World, and in refusing to grab for the glory or to look for the easy way out – in being happy with his lot in life – Jesus shows us what it is to trust in God for the big things, too.

Only through God do we make healthy and proper choices for our lives and for our world, and for the lives of those God entrusts to our care and concern.

Lent can be a wonderful time to deepen our sense of connectedness to God, and to learn to trust in God's will and God's way of life. During Lent, I encourage you to find an area in life that can be your place of wilderness and trust, and then watch for how God would work in your life.

Maybe give something up, and spend that time with God instead, in prayer or study or reflection. Maybe take something on – like a healthy habit or a service project – and do that quietly, in honor of God; don't tell anybody, just keep that between you and God.

Whatever you do to clear away some of the clutter in your life, or to give up some of the control we all cling to, whatever you do to be more trusting of God, let this period of Lent be a time of drawing closer to God, of listening to what God would say concerning your life, and then trust in God to lead you – to lead us all – to an easier and more blessed way of living. Amen.

PASTORAL PRAYER

Gracious God, the journey of Lent comes to us as a gift. It is a reminder to us to slow down, unplug ourselves, and be still and quiet in your presence.

Lord, it takes discipline for us to do this. We are addicted to instant access and immediate response. We are so used to being "on" that we have lost sight of our need for rest, for renewal and especially for you.

So, we thank you for the spiritual discipline of Lent. We lay aside our calendars and "to do" lists and focus instead on your gifts and blessings. We stop long enough to say "thank you" instead of running hurriedly and thoughtlessly through our day.

We acknowledge the work of your grace in our lives – and the reality that it is anything but "cheap." And, we wait. We wait expectantly and patiently for you to speak and to make yourself known to us in new and surprising ways.

To this we commit ourselves this day, for the sake of Jesus Christ, who taught us to pray, saying:

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.
Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts,
as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.

For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.