

**SAN MARINO CONGREGATIONAL
UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST**

Reflections by Pastor Donald Shenk
(Delivered on Sunday, March 5, 2017)

Text: **Matthew 4:1-11** (*The Message*)

Next Jesus was taken into the wild by the Spirit for the Test. The Devil was ready to give it. Jesus prepared for the Test by fasting forty days and forty nights. That left him, of course, in a state of extreme hunger, which the Devil took advantage of in the first test: "Since you are God's Son, speak the word that will turn these stones into loaves of bread."

Jesus answered by quoting Deuteronomy: "It takes more than bread to stay alive. It takes a steady stream of words from God's mouth."

For the second test the Devil took him to the Holy City. He sat him on top of the Temple and said, "Since you are God's Son, jump." The Devil goaded him by quoting Psalm 91: "He has placed you in the care of angels. They will catch you so that you won't so much as stub your toe on a stone."

Jesus countered with another citation from Deuteronomy: "Don't you dare test the Lord your God."

For the third test, the Devil took him to the peak of a huge mountain. He gestured expansively, pointing out all the earth's kingdoms, how glorious they all were. Then he said, "They're yours—lock, stock, and barrel. Just go down on your knees and worship me, and they're yours."

Jesus' refusal was curt: "Beat it, Satan!" He backed his rebuke with a third quotation from Deuteronomy: "Worship the Lord your God, and only him. Serve him with absolute single-heartedness."

The Test was over. The Devil left. And in his place, angels! Angels came and took care of Jesus' needs.

Reflections by Pastor Donald: **"Wilderness Wanderings"**

I believe in the wilderness.

I believe in the interdependence of all living things.

I believe in the grandeur of the great and tiny in the scorched and fresh earth.

I believe in the space that allows our hearts to soar, the room to move and breathe.

I believe that the wilderness reminds us to live in freedom,
revealing the mysteries of death and rebirth.

I believe that the wilderness is a great sanctuary of playfulness, creativity, and celebration.

I believe that the wilderness surprises us when we have reached the end of our possibilities.

I believe in the power of the wilderness to transform itself after destruction,
providing us with an example of renewal and hope.

That's "The Wilderness Creed" by Trisha Watts and Gabrielle Lord in their book, "Sanctuary."

As Jesus wanders the wilderness in our text for today, trailed by that nasty devil voice that I would imagine all of us are familiar with in one form or another, I marvel at his ability to speak so surely and with great conviction and power. You know that devil voice yourself, don't you; that doubting,

troubling, challenging voice that sounds during those twilight hours between sleeping and waking as we wander our own wilderness, and wonder why we are beset with such thoughts and visions?

Father Richard Rohr during one of his scintillating sessions during the “Drawing from a Deeper Well” conference I attended in November confessed to his own wilderness wanderings during those twilight hours when the devil knocks at his door and tries to untie his moorings. The only thing that seems to work during those times, he said, was to return to what he knew was true – God’s love for him and his love for God and the foundations of his faith. Bringing forth affirmations and reciting the foundational truths are the only defenses against such an attack, it would seem, he noted.

And so Jesus, in the wilderness, finds HIS voice clear and sure, grounded in the precepts of what he knows is true – that which belongs to God and that which God has commanded – and uses that voice to deflect the devil voice that would bring him down and use his humanity against him.

Where have you found yourself wandering in the wilderness in your own life? Have there been times when you’ve been so lost you couldn’t tell where you were in the psychic and/or spiritual landscape you found yourself in? Have there been times when you wandered lost and afraid, beset by all the negative voices of your past nipping at your heels like some rabid dog trying to take you down?

Where do you turn in these times? What works for you when you find yourself lost and afraid, tempted to give in to the voices of doom and gloom and your own exhaustion? Have you co-created a foundation for yourself built from the strongest materials God has to offer us? Do you have a support group you can turn to with words of comfort and encouragement? There is so much available to us in the wilderness even when all we think we see is sand and a prickly cactus or two if we but trust in God to guide us and listen deeply for the still small voice that actually speaks far louder than any devil voice can shout its temptations and un or “alternate” truths. That foundation of faithfulness will carry us through any time if we are open and listening to God’s voice and willing to walk into the wilderness to see what awaits us there.

“Therefore let all who are faithful offer prayer to you;” the Psalmist sings in our lectionary Psalm 32 for today, “at a time of distress, the rush of mighty waters shall not reach them. You are a hiding place for me; you preserve me from trouble; you surround me with glad cries of deliverance.”

“As Jesus knew, going into the barren and uncomfortable places isn’t about proving how holy we are, or how tough, or how brave,” poet and commentator Jan Richardson writes in her musings on this text before us today. “It’s about letting God draw us into the place where we don’t know everything, don’t have to know everything, indeed may be emptied of nearly everything we think we know. And thereby we become free to receive the word, the wisdom, the clarity about who we are and what God is calling us to do.”

“...all the various temptations we may encounter stem from the primary temptation to forget whose we are and therefore to forget who we are,” Dr. David Lose states in his article on this text, “Identity as Gift and Promise.” “Because once you don’t remember who you and whose you are, you’ll do all kinds of things to dispel the insecurity that attends any human life and to find that sense of security and acceptance that is essential to being happy... The devil tries to undermine Jesus’ relationship with God by suggesting it is not secure, that he should test it by throwing himself off the mountain, or that he should go his own way by creating food for himself, or that he should seek the protection and patronage of the devil rather than trust God’s provision. Yet at each point Jesus resists, not simply by quoting Scripture in general but by quoting Scripture that reminds him of God’s trustworthiness, the need to depend on God for all good things, and consequently of God’s promise to care for him and all God’s children.”

“Jesus,” he writes, “falls back on his relationship with God, reminding himself whose he is and so remembering who he is, a dependent, but beloved, child of God – dependent on the providence, care, and protection, of the God who has promised to do anything to care for him and all of us.”

Here is the example of the Christ. Here is the power in remembering whose we are and in whose hand we are held. This is the foundation we’ve been building together as God’s children, holding hope for one another when things APPEAR hopeless. Reaching out to each other and to those around us to share who we are as God’s children and to share the blessings that have been given to us. In service and in love we create not only our own foundation of faith and fountain of grace to draw and drink from when we find ourselves in the wilderness, but we have so much more to offer others who may be wandering the desert pathways themselves, perhaps unaware of how much is available to them.

“From silence to truth-telling, our journeys are opportunities to rediscover one’s true self, even after encountering evil or making poor choices along the way,” the Reverend Lizette Merchán-Pinilla, a UCC minister in the Kansas-Oklahoma conference writes. “From we to I, from I to me, to you and to all others, we create circles amongst us. Circles drawn of self-centered individuals to the communal and community-centered folk, from those who think locally and act globally, as well as people at the other end of the spectrum...Many times life will come toward us in full force, with its circum-stances--its messiness and stabs in the back--bringing us to our knees, knocking us off our feet, or lifting us up as high as the heavens in mind, spirit, and body. Then we gather around, and share our innermost experiences of pain, success, joys, and challenges, and open up a well of opportunity to truth-telling. It is only until then that one can start moving forward to let healing, compassion, and true self-love come in.”

In this Lenten season as you, perhaps, wander in your own wilderness, remember that God is ever with you and that the faithfulness of our God is guiding you through whatever desert you may encounter. Hold out your hands to other wanderers and let the strength of your brothers’ and sisters’ love sustain you as you wander, knowing that you are a truly whole and beloved child of God.

Desert Prayer by Jan Richardson

I am not asking you
to take this wilderness from me,
to remove this place of starkness
where I come to know
the wildness within me,
where I learn to call the names
of the ravenous beasts
that pace inside me,
to finger the brambles
that snake through my veins,

to taste the thirst
that tugs at my tongue.

But send me
tough angels,
sweet wine,
strong bread:
just enough.

Amen.