

SAN MARINO CONGREGATIONAL UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST

Reflections by Pastor Donald Shenk (Delivered on Sunday, March 6, 2022)

Text: **Luke 4:1-13** (*The Inclusive Bible*)

Jesus returned from the Jordan filled with the Holy Spirit, and was led by the Spirit into the desert for 40 days, where he was tempted by the Devil. Jesus ate nothing during that time, at the end of which he was famished. The Devil said to Jesus, "If you are God's own, command this stone to turn into bread." Jesus answered, "Scripture has it, we don't live on bread alone."

Then the Devil took Jesus up higher and showed him all the nations of the world in a single instant. The Devil said, "I will give you all the power and the glory of these nations; the power has been given to me and I can give it to whomever I wish. Prostrate yourself in homage before me, and it will all be yours.

In reply, Jesus said, "Scripture has it:

'You will worship the most high God;
God alone will you adore.'"

Then the devil led Jesus to Jerusalem, set him up on the parapet of the Temple and said, "If you are God's Own, throw yourself down from here, for scripture has it,

'God will tell the angels to take care of you;
with their hands they'll support you,
that you may never stumble on a stone.'"

Jesus said to the Devil in reply, "It also says, 'Do not put God to the test.'"

When the Devil had finished all this tempting, Jesus was left alone. The Devil awaited another opportunity.

Reflecting with Pastor Donald Shenk: *"Wilderness Wanderings"*

Will you please pray with me:

Divine Sojourner,

On this first Sunday in Lent, as we saunter far into the wilderness, may your light sustain us. May the questions that fill our minds with doubt drift away into the sands of the journey. May we dig within our souls to remove the prejudices deep within us; and however we wander in this season, may your Holy Glow refocus our attention on our relationship with you and the ways we connect with one another and those who cross our paths. Amen.

Sisters and brothers, Lenten pilgrims, together this day we embark on a wilderness journey....We are Pilgrims on a road of awe and wonder.

We will journey through places of solitude, places with questions, places that lead us to reflection...We are Pilgrims on a road to self-discovery and learning.

We will journey through times of alienation, times of hunger, and times of thirst...We are Pilgrims on a road to oasis and refreshment.

We will journey through struggles born of circumstance or struggles brought on by choice...We are Pilgrims on the road to acceptance and healing.

But wherever we go this Lenten season, we will make this journey together – side by side – moving with Christ to the beat of God’s heart...For we are Pilgrims on the road to risen life.

Each year as this Lenten season rolls around and we journey again with Jesus into the desert, I wonder what our learning will be about and what will strike us in the heart and the soul as we encounter the seemingly barren wasteland that holds so much beauty and worth within it if we but search for it with God’s eyes and follow the Spirit’s leading.

Indeed, in our text for today, the first thing we hear as Jesus is led into the desert for 40 days of wandering and wondering, is that he is full OF the spirit and is being led BY the spirit into the wilderness. There’s a deep significance to be found in these two statements as we realize that it is only by being filled with the Spirit and then prodded by that same Spirit that we are able to enter the wilderness of our own lives and face the trials and temptations awaiting us there.

Many if not all of us have experienced a kind of wilderness in our lives, I would imagine. Some of us are, perhaps, experiencing it right now, in fact. And, I would hazard to guess many of us feel as if we’ve been living in a kind of desert these last couple of years as we wandered the wilderness in search of respite and relief (and sometimes the elusive packet of baker’s yeast or even a roll of toilet paper).

Desert or wilderness times can be described as those times where we wander, seemingly lost and alone, through unknown territory be it a physical, mental, emotional or spiritual territory where we find ourselves questioning everything that may have had meaning to us before we entered the present place in which we find ourselves. Here in this barren place, we are buffeted by the temptations of this world and the darkest side of our natures, those things which beckon us to just give in and give up and go with the forces that would pull us under. Here in this wilderness with a guide certainly not of the Spirit, we are tempted to see all of life and all of creation as one big hopeless landscape.

And, as we harken back to those opening words from Luke, we realize that without the Spirit’s guidance and the Spirit’s fullness within our hearts and our heads, there’s little we will learn from this wilderness time. There’s even a very good chance we will get lost there and remain wandering and wondering for far longer than those symbolic 40 days.

In fact, I think the greatest temptation we have before us in all of our lives is the one that would tell us we don’t need the support of the Spirit but can make it on our own without the Spirit’s guidance as we journey forth in our lives, especially during those desert sojourns. This is the temptation that has the possibility of keeping us from the Spirit-filled people that are willing to walk into the wilderness themselves to meet us where we are and offer us sustenance and hope and maybe even a glass of clean, cool water.

What would you say is the significance of these 40 days of Lent? Could they perhaps be a symbol of the time WE must take to recognize the power of God in our lives and, thereby, our own power as children of God to stand up to the temptations that assault us daily and would tell us we're less than God knows us to be?

Understanding our wandering during Lent in this way could help us to understand these times of deprivation and unknowingness as ones which can lead us to that paradoxical yet sure knowledge that God is truly with us in ALL times and in ALL places and that the Spirit dwelling within us can take us through anything this world has to hurl our way.

Look around you and you'll see people that have come through the wilderness once or many times, or might even be there right now and whose faith is stronger and even more inspiring because of it.

I think this kind of interpretation of the story we have before us today can lead us to look at temptation in a different way as well.

For most of us, I would imagine, we see temptation as that naughty thing that summons us with a sugary or maybe chocolate-coated crooked finger, like some nasty Willy Wonka concoction contraption ready to pull us in and then take us under in one fell swoop.

The marvelous Dr. David Lose, however, would argue that temptation can be seen in another way as he looks at the, "underlying nature of temptation itself."

"I would argue," he writes, "that temptation is not so often temptation toward something – usually portrayed as doing something you shouldn't – but rather is usually the temptation away from something – namely, our relationship with God and the identity we receive in and through that relationship."

"Too often," he notes, "Christians have focused on all the things we shouldn't do, instead of pointing us to the gift and grace of our identity as children of God."

And here is where that very first phrase that began our text and these explorations comes back to us yet again. Being filled with the Holy Spirit means we must accept ourselves as children of God and recognize the gift and the grace of that identity as we go forward into anything in our lives; most especially those times of testing and trial and the tantalizing temptation to see ourselves as anything less than God's own.

When we look at Jesus's responses to each of the Devil's temptations in our text today, we get yet another handle on how to survive the wilderness times of our lives and those dark places the soul will sometimes seek out even when we don't know we're going to be taken there.

Jesus is steeped in the scriptures and in the teachings of the one who created all that is and ever will be. "Rooted in the Scriptures," Dr. Lose writes, "Jesus is reminded not only that he has enough and is enough but that he is of infinite worth in the eyes of God."

Here we look at these temptations of “Bread, power, and safety, but it just as well might have been youth, beauty, and wealth. Or confidence, fame, and security. On one level, we experience specific temptations very concretely, but on another they are all the same, as they seek to shift our allegiance, trust, and confidence away from God and toward some substitute that promises a more secure identity.”

Our wilderness times may look very different from the journey we saw Jesus taking in today’s scripture. Our wilderness times in the 21st century may have to do more with letting our attention be drawn from God to those things that have no meaning and no worth in the long run (or often even in the short run for that matter).

“Lay up not for yourselves treasures on earth,” Jesus says in his Sermon on the Mount, reminding us that the true treasure is in our connection to our Creator who shows us a road out of the wilderness, leading us forward on a journey to fulfillment and wholeness where we are sure of our identity and know without a doubt whose child we are and where we’re headed.

As we wander on this journey, may God the Divine Light open our souls to healing and wisdom. May Christ the Sojourner lead us into oases of renewal in arid and barren times. May the Spirit of Hope fill us with courage to carry on. And, as Jesus embraced the struggles of the wilderness, may we find strength to abide in our own wilderness of the soul.

Amen.