

Clear Out Your Control

*A sermon preached on Luke 4:1-13 on Sunday, March 9, 2025,
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I.

Five years ago this week, we entered a wilderness like the world hadn't seen in a generation. The global coronavirus pandemic had reached the tipping point of spreading here in our country, and the very best wisdom of our scientists, researchers, and leaders was to shut down as many public places as possible to limit the spread of the virus. I'm sure we all remember the grip of fear in those days, its totality, the chokehold that uncertainty had on us when the regular rhythms and practices of our lives ground to an absolute stop.

This wilderness lacked the hot, dusty landscape of Jesus's desert sojourn. Many of us had more creature comforts than we deserve – money to secure needed resources, a safe home within which to isolate, friends only a few clicks away, and neighbors checking in. But the pandemic was a wilderness, no question. When so much about our daily life existed outside of our control, that season forced us to essentialize. Perhaps we didn't fully appreciate the invitation while it was unfolding, but in hindsight, we can acknowledge its lessons. Whittling down the clutter of our living so as to know what mattered most. Letting the spare, languishing landscape be for us a teacher. Finding clarity, constraining and focusing so as to discern the good from the essential.¹ Relinquishing the fiction that we ever had control over our lives in the first place.

II.

¹ One of the best explorations of this type of work for the modern American is from Greg McKeown, *Essentialism: The Disciplined Pursuit of Less*, p121-122.

These are lessons of any wilderness in any season – not just a pandemic season – but ones that the season of Lent expressly invites. It’s a season of intention, asking followers of Jesus to consider honestly: *what fills your days? What is occupying your attention, testing you, inviting your growth? Where is God in it all? Finally, what matters most?* And it begins with Jesus in the wilderness.

We turn to this text every year, one recorded in three of the four gospels at the outset of Jesus’s ministry. Fresh from the waters of baptism, Luke tells us that Jesus was ‘full of the Holy Spirit’ when he departed the Jordan and led by that same Holy Spirit into the wilderness where he was tested for forty days by the devil. Students of scripture would recognize that number ‘40,’ the biblical way of saying ‘for a long time.’ They’d connect it with the 40 days with Noah amidst the flood; 40 days with Moses atop Mount Sinai and 40 days with Elijah atop Mount Horeb, all needing food; and not the least of which would be the 40 years of the Israelites’ journey through the wilderness toward the Promised Land.² These forty days see Jesus alone, famished, and weak, weary as the devil – or as other translations say, “the tempter” or “the adversary” – finds him there. You might notice in your Bible that the word “devil” isn’t capitalized – “Devil” is not his name, so as we consider who the devil, the tempter, the adversary is, let’s think less of horns and pitchforks and more of the oppositional forces attempting to thwart God’s dream for the world.³

First the tempter tries to prey on Jesus’s hunger – “if you’re the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread.” What’s the problem

² <http://www.saltproject.org/progressive-christian-blog/2019/3/5/the-hidden-fountain-salts-lectionary-commentary-for-lent-1>

³ Thanks to Debie Thomas for this clarity in *A Faith of Many Rooms: Inhabiting a More Spacious Christianity*, p92.

with that? It's just a stone, it's just a loaf of bread, and Jesus is quite hungry. Then, taking Jesus up to see all the kingdoms of this world, the tempter tries to excite Jesus's human urge for power: "if you'll worship me, to you I will give you all this — all the glory and authority too — and it all will be yours." Again we wonder — given the state of our world, wouldn't the world be better off if Jesus was in charge? So where's the issue? But both times, Jesus remembers the Israelites in the wilderness and, thus, remembers who God is and how God acts — "it is written, 'one doesn't live by bread alone,'" and again, "it is written, 'worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.'"⁴

But as if the tempter's finally caught on, recognizing Jesus's pattern of returning again and again to scripture, the tempter took him to the temple in Jerusalem (right in the religious heart of it all!), questions his identity as the Son of God, and then hits hard on the theme of safety: "if you're the Son of God," he says, "throw yourself down from here — *for it is written* (you hear him using language Jesus uses?), he will command his angels to protect you and keep you unharmed." Jesus speaks with a note of finality, "it is said, 'don't put the Lord your God to the test.'" And with a note foreshadowing the end of Jesus's life, Luke says the devil departed from him "until an opportune time."

III.

These temptations Jesus faced in the wilderness were for bread, power, and safety, but they could just have easily been for water, success, and legacy... or youth, wealth, and being right. Because all touch on the innate human desire for control: control over our hungers, control over others, control over our safety. But is that all bad? Note that the tempter didn't try to entice Jesus with some obvious evil! Rather, as Fred Craddock said, "real

⁴ Fred Craddock, *Interpretation: Luke*, p56.

temptation beckons us to do that about which much good can be said. Stones to bread? — the hungry hope so; take political control? — the oppressed hope so; leap from the temple? — those longing for proof of God’s power among us hope so. All this is to say that *a real temptation is an offer not to fall but to rise*. The tempter in Eden did not ask, ‘Do you wish to be as the devil?’ but, ‘Do you wish to be as God?’ There is nothing here of debauchery; no self-respecting devil would approach a person with offers of personal, domestic, or social ruin. That is in the small print at the bottom of temptation. If anyone is having trouble believing that Jesus was *really* tempted, then he or she needs to keep in mind that temptation is an indication of strength, not of weakness. We aren’t tempted to do what we cannot do, but what is within our power.”⁵

Richard Rohr furthers that idea, saying, “Temptations are always about “good” things, or we could not be tempted... Most people's daily ethical choices are not between total good and total evil, but between various shades of good, a partial good that is wrongly perceived as an absolute good,... or even evil that disguises itself as good. These are what get us into trouble.”⁶

In the same way, the temptations you and I face may first look like opportunities or potential achievements ahead but then later look like time away from family or decisions that pull you from your integrity. What started with kind companionship of a friend in need becomes a never-satisfied need to be needed. What once was a love for all sorts of experiences in this life becomes a gluttonous, distracted rout through people and places and things, never ever satisfied. What may begin as a desire for justice may actually be

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Richard Rohr, *Wondrous Encounters: Scripture for Lent*.

the thing that keeps you perpetually angry. What started as a compelling need to call out someone else's bad behavior might just become the same impetus to "other" them and scold them and draw a sharp line between where we are good and where they are not, all the while failing to note that we're all in need of God's grace. What started out of a desire for well-being has become an unbridled need for control – managing your life, your safety, your job, your family, your appearance, your fears, your workplace, your politics, your investments, your relationships within an inch of their lives, not realizing your failure to trust in God's accompaniment along the way.

But even Jesus in the wilderness was accompanied by the Spirit. Even our world amidst a global pandemic was accompanied by the Spirit. Even you and that hard relationship, or tough situation, or infuriating reality are accompanied by the Spirit. Though the adversaries to God's work of Love would have us believe otherwise, our trust can begin and end with the encouragement that we are never, ever alone.

IV.

So how are we to know? How are we to trust in God's steadfast hand such that we relinquish our need to grip and grasp control every way we can? How can we prioritize what matters most?

This Lent, we're asking ourselves: *what do we need to clear out in order to make more room for Love, for life, for God?* Maybe for you it's physical space, cluttered with the detritus of lingering memories and unmade decisions, it's grip on you just as much emotional as it is physical. Or perhaps it's your habits or practices that need decluttering – you know the ones that distract, numb, pacify, assuage. Or maybe there's a relationship in your life that has invaded your mind and heart in ways that are detrimental to your dignity, your spirit,

your life. Or perhaps the one thing you're trying most desperately to control – comfort, power, security, maybe? – is the very thing you need God's help with.

As we talked about on Ash Wednesday, participating in the work of clearing out might look like giving something up or taking something on this Lent. Or it might not be that at all, because the invitation you need this season isn't for activity, but rather for stillness with the God who calls you beloved. Like Father Greg Boyle said: "maybe the desert is really a time to notice the notice of God."⁷ Maybe you ask yourself: *what situation or relationship in my life is most in need of trusting God?* Maybe you do as Carlo Carretto says, and "make a little desert in your life." No matter how we choose to situate ourselves within the wilderness of Lent, my prayer is that in the clearing and decluttering, we are able to find our way to a newly-robust trust in the God who never leaves us and loves us at each step along the path.

Because God is at the heart of it all. The reason for these Lenten examinations. The energy for our living. The locus from whom all blessings flow. The strengthener of Jesus in those hard, desert days. God who first calls us beloved. God who last welcomes us to eternal life. God who creates and redeems and sustains every day of this life. God who is stronger than any force for evil in this world, any adversary wooing our attention, any tempter feeding our need for control. God whose justice will roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream. God who never stops reaching into the graves of our lives and pulling us toward resurrection.

V.

⁷ Gregory Boyle, *The Whole Language: The Power of Extravagant Tenderness*, p2.

Back in those early days of the pandemic, as remote learning materials began to take over our kitchen table and cloth masks got a designated spot by the door, one coping mechanism I leaned into was to try and assert some measure of familiarity with our lives. I called it *familiarity*; you might call it *control*. So we found a poster and made a schedule on day one of quarantine, and hung it in our kitchen. *8:00am breakfast, 9:00am moving our bodies, 9:30am schoolwork*, and so on. I don't think we actually followed that schedule, not one time, but it provided me some measure of comfort to affect even the smallest thing when we were bewildered by most everything else.

A couple of months later, my kids decided they wanted to play Legos outside, grabbed the big bin of them, and headed outside. Silas had set up camp on our black wrought iron table, and not minutes later, I heard him crying in frustration: "Mommy! The pieces keep falling through!"

Of course they did, bless him. Those tiny Lego pieces kept slipping through the cracks of the table, raining down on the patio below. In a flash of inspiration, I remembered we had a small piece of posterboard inside — that daily schedule we hung helpfully in our kitchen on the first day of quarantine. But today, it came off the wall to be a Lego-holder slid beneath them, so that the pieces would be held.

I cried at the drop of a hat in those days, and I did just then, all over again. I gave thanks for all of life's catchers that uphold us when the pieces begin to fall. For Jesus, who teaches us how to trust God, who gathers up the pieces of our lives so that nothing may be lost, so that we can build and play and rest in the warmth of the day. And for God above all else, whose Peace enters even the darkest, most fearful corners of our lives — the ones we're trying to hold onto for dear life! — with the gentle reminder: 'do not be afraid.'

Friends, this Lenten season, might I encourage you to practice your trust in God. To let God hold you, as Walter Brueggemann said, “to quit running, to let ourselves be caught and embraced in love, like a sheep with safe pasture, like a traveler offered rich and unexpected food.” May it be so for you this Lent and this life! Amen.