

The Ones in the Wilderness, Displaced

A sermon preached by Emily Hull McGee on Matthew 4:1-11

on February 22, 2026, with First Baptist Church on Fifth, Winston-Salem, NC

I.

Maybe you're the voracious one. Look around this world! Why wouldn't you be, with an endless stream of experiences to have, places to see, things to do, money to earn? Perhaps your cravings aren't so much for *new*, rather for *more*. It's time to go to work, and you want more alone time, screen time, intimate time, play time – there's never enough time! The drink is empty, and you pour another. The cart is empty, and you find something else to buy. The plate is cleaned, and you go back for more. Endless scrolling is made for people like you, because you never reach the end. Never complete. Never full. Never satisfied. Always hungry for more.

Or maybe you're the worrywort. This world to you can look like a treacherous obstacle course, and simply getting you and your loved ones from sunup to sundown safely requires every ounce of your thinking and preparation. You have the security cameras on your doorbell, the locks and blocks on your children's tech devices, the ability to track and trace everyone you hold most dear. An internet browser primed and ready for your endless research on the best treatment for this illness or a workout plan for peak conditioning. All these tools work in tandem with the personal questions you easily deflect, and the tight smile that shuts down sensitive conversation lest you find yourself unexpectedly exposed. The vulnerability craze of the 2010s? You thought all along that it was for suckers, not for you. Now look around at the madness and chaos we're living through! Your posture and preparation are justified, every single bit.

Or maybe you're nursing an ego that you have no reason to think isn't in check. You're the one people turn to! You're the one who keeps the trains moving on time! You're the one whose opinion and influence and leadership are held up as examples for the rest. In your spheres of influence, you are seen. Regarded. Favored! The affection fuels you, though you know it would be gauche to admit that, and the control over your life that you've painstakingly honed along the way feels justified. Hard-won. Admirable, even! Your eyes always scan the horizons for what else is out there: the higher-paying job, the nicer home, the better investment strategy, the more significant relationships. Why wouldn't you? Growing your capacity and strength and clout only expand what's possible.

Now perhaps you wouldn't define yourselves as the voracious one, the worrywort, the ego. Perhaps you wouldn't go so far as to define yourself by your proclivities toward hunger and safety and control, but you certainly can identify with the tendencies. Perhaps you could just as easily substitute a quest for youth, success, and legacy... or intimacy, wealth, and being right... and then you start feeling exposed. How else are you supposed to live in these troubled times without these energies?! Anything to toughen the experience of being human, to keep you from discomfort, to line the walls of your fallible lives with the protection and pacification that you need to make it through.

If questioned, you'd tell anyone these habits mostly work for you. Why wouldn't they? But then the day comes when it all falls apart. When the very thing you were working for and toiling toward and attempting to keep at bay happened. The job is lost. The beloved passes away. The dream fails. The relationship ends. The secret is exposed. The unthinkable happens. You've

hinged from The Before to The After, and now you find yourself in a wilderness that was never, ever of your choosing. Or perhaps this wilderness isn't immediate, stark, unflinching, but rather you slide into it without even realizing where you were going. The habits and relationships and decisions that filled your days have slowly turned to dust, and one day you wake up not even sure who you are anymore or how you even got here.

This wilderness is as uncomfortable and wild and unfamiliar as anything you've ever experienced before. It feels like the landscape of your life shook up like a snow globe, but now everything has fallen in different places, and some things you can't even locate. Day and night, your worst fears stalk you. Anxiety pulses like a drum. There seems to be a megaphone placed in front of your weaknesses, broadcasting them far and wide for all to hear. Death slides around in the shadows, and you wonder how you'll ever find your way through, what will be waiting for you on the other side, who even you'll be.

It is impossibly displacing, this wilderness you're in. Days whistle by, one after the next, and you grow more weary, more desperate, despair your constant companion. Whatever reserves carried you at first have worn all the way down. You're hungry for nourishment, hungry for safety, hungry for control. Your soul feels like a warehouse, where burdens are dumped each day and you lose yourself amidst them all.¹ You convince yourself you are abandoned² and alone and forgotten.

And that is when it arrives.

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¹ Karl Rahner, as quoted in Emilie Griffin's *Small Surrenders*, p9.

² Loved learning this week that the word for desert in Greek is *eremos*, which literally means 'abandonment' and is the term from which we derive the word 'hermit'.

You had been primed for temptation to announce itself, to put out the neon sign and the flashing lights lest you mistake it. You had expected something obviously wrong, humorously gaudy and bad. You had thought you'd have all the defenses ready to take it on when it grabbed hold of your attention, your energies, your resources, your loyalty. You had imagined how you might resist its lure.

It shows up differently among us though, of course. To the athlete, it might come as a dirty hit on the rival team that you know would ensure a win. To the boss, perhaps as a bonus slid your way even though you know it's coming to no one else. To the nervous student with an essay to write or an overwhelmed preacher with a sermon to write, ChatGPT. To the money-strapped with debt to pay, online betting. To the lonely, empty companionship. To the afraid, tyranny.³ But never as the *obvious* sin, never as the conspicuous breach so clearly filled with bad intent. Perhaps the invitation comes just once or many times, announcing itself with a whisper or a roar. Regardless, "at the heart of the deception are offers not to fall but to rise."⁴

At first glance, who could blame you for being curious? These offers feel like the very possibilities you've been waiting for, or the miracle drug that will cure what ails, or the shortcut that you bet will enable far more than all you can ask or imagine. The longer you look, the more reasonable it seems! The fairer it appears! Why *not* meet my immediate needs? Why *not* keep me even more safe? Why *not* claim what should be mine?

³ With gratitude to Peter Gomes in his sermon, "An Opportune Time," for this rhetorical device in *Sermons: Biblical Wisdom for Daily Living*, p52.

⁴ Thanks to the incomparable Fred Craddock for this searing turn of phrase in his sermon called "Test Run," found here: <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/2003-02/test-run>.

And there it is – the lure. The snare. That which asks you to winnow what is wide, to test what is already sure, to clip what, by its very essence, needs to take time. What may begin as a desire for justice may actually become the thing that keeps you perpetually angry. 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 originated as a needed corrective toward self-care becomes a zealous hoarding of our time and energy lest we be inconvenienced. What arose as drive and ambition becomes an unstoppable, unencumbered quest for success.

If you're being honest with yourself, this lure, this enticement, this temptation is less about doing what you really want to do, and more about being someone other than who you are, who you know yourself to be.⁵ That's part of the snare, of course, because at the heart of it all is the call away from deep trust. Away from remembering! Away from deep trust in the One who is above all, and in all, and through all. Away from deep trust in the provision, protection, and power that was never yours to grasp in the first place, only offered as good gifts from the Good Giver.

You feel so weak. This temptation feels so strong. It's right there for the taking. What could be the harm?

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There are other paths. But in this one, you remember.

Then you remember.

Then you remember who and whose you are.

⁵ Thomas G. Long, *Matthew*, Westminster Bible Companion, p36-37.

Then you remember you've never, not once, been left alone to face this world, no matter the wilderness you're in.

Then you remember God whose very nature is love, love so vast, so deep, so wide.

Then you remember Jesus. You remember that sandwiched between his baptism and ministry is when the tempter offers him bread, safety, power – what satiates, what confirms, what quickens. You remember how the tempter tries to get Jesus to shortcut his way through the wilderness: to make small the vast ministry of his calling, to limit his trust of God instead of leaning fully into his faith, to skip the messy middle of life and get right onto the win. And then you remember that Jesus has endured every temptation, every suffering, every loneliness, every grief, every nail, every lash, every wilderness and has been found faithful.

Then you remember the Spirit, who infuses even the shadows with sacred presence.

As you remember these things, it's as if scales begin to fall from your eyes. You remember! You touch your skin, and it is still wet from the baptism of new life. You clutch at your beating heart, and find the beautiful, maddening gift of being human pulses right there with it. You take off your shoes and find that the ordinary dirt and dust is actually holy ground, and that it always has been, even as displaced and dislocated as you may be.

Yes, the temptation is still there, with all its promises, and yet you hear it now as if from far away. Its hollow echoes are now clear, its dazzling invitation now dulled with truth. You now know what to look for, what particular contours hit your particular wounds. You might just say that angels are tending to you too.

For you are one who remembers.

And then you find yourself sitting at church on the First Sunday of Lent, where the preacher encourages you to return to that wilderness: to let the wind whistle through the spare limbs of our lives and landscapes once more, at least for forty days. You don't want to go back there or stay there. *Doesn't she know how displacing it was?* And yet, you know this place is a place of memory, that the Sundays in this Lenten season become reminders of the joy of discovery, the hope of repentance, the grace of liberation, life beyond death. Forty days for clearing out and returning to God and opening your heart once again. "Forty days to remember what it is like to live by the grace of God alone and not by what we can supply for ourselves."⁶

So you recommit yourself once more to a faithful path through the wilderness and all it will teach you. You allow yourself to feel tested, to exercise again your muscles of trust in God's presence and provision. You walk with Jesus on the way to the table, to the garden, to the trial, to the streets, to the cross, to the tomb. Somehow, this time, in this wilderness wandering, displacement gives way to grounding, temptation bends to obedience, despair unfolds towards hope.

Because you remember!

And Jesus remembers you too.

Amen.

⁶ Barbara Brown Taylor, "Lenten Discipline," *Home By Another Way*, p66.