

**Trinity Presbyterian Church**  
**March 5, 2017**

We all live according to seasons. Spring is delightful, unless you suffer from allergies. Summer is too hot, but it is beach time! Fall is known for its colors and the scents which spice the air. Then there is winter--the gloomiest, darkest season.

Every year we go through seasons in the church too. We live inside Advent's anticipation. The joy of the Easter season. But it seems the gloomiest season is Lent: we begin with ashes—a reminder of our mortality—and follow Jesus' dark path climaxing at the cross. And every year we begin the season of Lent with the same bleak scene: Jesus in the wilderness: hungry, alone, tempted by the devil.

Text: Matthew 4: 1-11

*4 Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. 2 He fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished. 3 The tempter came and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread." 4 But he answered, "It is written,*

*'One does not live by bread alone,  
but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.'* "

*5 Then the devil took him to the holy city and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, 6 saying to him, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down; for it is written,*

*'He will command his angels concerning you,  
and 'On their hands they will bear you up,  
so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.'* "

*7 Jesus said to him, "Again it is written, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.' "*

*8 Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor; 9 and he said to him, "All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me." 10 Jesus said to him, "Away with you, Satan! for it is written,*

*'Worship the Lord your God,  
and serve only him.'* "

*11 Then the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him.*

**“Lent 1: Getting Grounded in the Wilderness”**

Have you ever experienced a wilderness season? A season where there are more questions than answers. A place where we look out into a lifeless scene. No gardens. No streams. Definitely not a land of milk and honey. The wilderness isn't a fun place to be! It's empty, lonely, scary, powerless. But notice in our bibles it says that the moment immediately after Jesus was baptized the Holy Spirit, leads Jesus into a lifeless and challenging place. I have always wanted to ask the good Lord above, "What are you doing by leading Jesus into the wilderness?"

**God: I'm listening.**

Jon: [confused] Did you all hear that or am I hearing voices again? God, is that you?

**God: Mother God. And yes it is me. Do you not recognize my voice by now?**

Jon: Well...it's just you sound a lot like someone I know who sings in the choir...plays guitar too.

**God: You have some questions? I'm here. Let's talk.**

Jon: Well, to be honest God...I've always had a lot of questions about this story; about why Jesus gets "led by the Spirit" into the wilderness to be tested.

**God: What's so confusing about that?**

Jon: It's just the wilderness isn't a fun place. If I can confess, the wilderness is a place that should be avoided. So why would Jesus, or any of us for that matter, be led by you into such a difficult place of emptiness and struggle?

**God: Ah, yes. The age old question.**

Jon: What do you mean?

**God: You want to know if I condone hardships. Why Jesus was led to be tempted? Why I allowed Job to suffer? Why I led the Israelites through the wilderness when I could've given them a shortcut? You want to know why I don't swoop down and save the people I love so much. Isn't that what you're asking?**

Jon: Well...

**God: It is, trust me...I'm God.**

Jon: Well...do you have an answer?

**God: Maybe.**

Jon: Maybe?

**God: Let's look at the story. Jesus is in the desert for forty days contemplating his calling. At the end of the story the devil enters the scene [singing "dun, dun, dun"]. So what does the tempter do?**

Jon: He first tells Jesus to turn the stones into bread. To use his power to feed his hunger—maybe even use his power to feed the entire world. I mean, could you imagine no more starving children? No more food deserts here in Winston Salem? Could you imagine all your people gathered around their table satisfied?

**God: I could imagine it and so could Jesus. Which is why it was so tempting.**

Jon: [questioning] But Jesus doesn't do it.

**God: Instead?**

Jon: Instead, Jesus says we can't live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from God.

**God: Yes. Jesus depends on me. He gets an "A" on the first part of the test. Then what happens?**

Jon: The devil tests Jesus again by telling him to throw himself off the temple... and you would catch him. Dazzling everyone around, proving your presence is with him. And everyone would know Jesus is the awaited Messiah and then all those who question who he is might actually support what he is doing and the message he brought. You know God,

**God: Yes...**

Jon: Sometimes it would be really nice to know for certain you were here. I mean, the world needs to know you are who you say you are. Then maybe there would be a lot more love and kindness to go around instead of all this fear and anxiety.

**God: But what does Jesus do?**

Jon: He says not to test you.

**God: Right. Do you remember when you were a kid...I think you were about ten years old.**

Jon: Oh no, God...you aren't going to embarrass me are you?

**God: You loved to jump off the couch pretending you could fly and then one day you prayed for me to catch you? If my memory serves me right—which it should since I'm God—you said, "If you are real then help me fly."**

Jon: [looking at the congregation] Actually I think I was more like five or six...

**God: So why did you ask me to do that?**

Jon: I was going through a rough time in my life and I guess I wanted to know you were with me. I wanted to know if my faith was real. That no matter what happened, things would still be okay.

**God: You were putting me to the test. But don't be embarrassed. I hear the same kind of prayers all the time. People wanting me to prove to them I am real by doing what they need me to do. In some cases it is to win the lottery, but in others it is a longing for a loved one to be healed or to end poverty, or racism. They are prayers for me to swoop in and save the day.**

Jon: [frustrated] Well, why don't you, God? I mean, Jesus had the opportunity right then and there to prove to the world who he was and who you are. And the world could've been a better place because of it.

**God: But?**

Jon: But he didn't.

**God: Keep going.**

Jon: Jesus didn't even give in when he was offered complete control over all the kingdoms of the world. All the laws he could have implemented for equality. All of it could've been under Jesus' rule. He could've molded the world into his vision of justice. He could've saved us right then and there. He could've used his power to unite us and turn this whole political mess around.

**God: But remember the deal he would've had to make?**

Jon: He would've had to bow down and worship the tempter. And you are the only one whom we shall serve and worship. I know, God. I know. *It's just hard.*

**God: Ah, yes. Now you are getting back to your original question.**

Jon: I am?

**God: You wanted to know the point of Jesus being led into the wilderness, right?**

Jon: Yeah...

**God: You see, in all three temptations Jesus was asked to use his power to do something that is essentially good: feed the hungry, prove he was the Messiah, rule the kingdoms of the world.**

Jon: Sure. These are all things that Jesus ends up doing later in his ministry: he feeds the multitudes, he shows the disciples he is the Messiah during his transfiguration, he heals the sick; he even claims Lordship of the Kingdom of God. He is the Savior. So what is the point?

**God: The point is that it is hard.**

Jon: Not helpful God...

**God: You said it yourself, didn't you? Life is hard. Well, ministry is hard. And sitting in the wilderness is hard. Living in relationship and community is hard. Working for justice and reconciliation is hard. Forgiving is hard. Did you expect following me would be easy?**

Jon: Well, sort of...so why didn't Jesus just sacrifice himself right then and there and... [getting it] oh...

**God: As much as I love Jesus, a savior isn't a savior if he takes the easy way out and saves himself. Jesus could have controlled the world, and avoided suffering on the cross, but he knew that a savior isn't about controlling the world, but loving it, even if it leads to suffering. That is what my love for you looks like. Remember when Jesus scolded Peter, saying, "get behind me, Satan?" That really freaked Peter out. But what was Peter trying to do?**

Jon: He was trying to get Jesus to save himself.

**God: And remember when Jesus was hanging on the cross? What did the crowd say?**

Jon: They said, "He can save others, why doesn't he save himself?" [pause] So Jesus was led into the wilderness because...

**God: [with conviction] Because he had to learn what it meant to be the savior. Just like the Israelites had to wander in the wilderness to learn what it meant to be my people—it took them forty years, by the way. Just like you and everyone else has to learn what it means to live according to your vocation. Just like the people sitting in the pews need to learn what it means to be a church in a world that is anything but easy. It is in the wilderness that you learn.**

Jon: Learn? Learn what?

**God: That we have a chance to get really close.**

Jon: How do you figure?

**God: Because in the wilderness, you learn to depend on me...[pause]**

Jon: Okay, God. I think I am starting to get it.

**God: Good. So now I have a question for you.**

Jon: Okay.

**God: Are you willing to be led into the wilderness too?**

Jon: To be honest, God. I'd rather avoid it.

**God: Well, you and everyone else. But listen: you aren't being called into the wilderness alone—Jesus is the only one called to go in it alone. So look around. There is a lot of love and care shared amongst the people in this room. Might even call them angels.**

Jon: Angels?

**God: [playfully] Well, that's probably going too far. But they are really great group of people!**

Jon: Yes, they are. You know God, one of my favorite authors once said, "Be in the desert and let it bloom." Maybe that is what we can practice together this Lent? To be in the wilderness together growing closer to you.

**God: Now that is a wise thought. Let it bloom, my child. Let it bloom.**

Jon: Thanks for the chat, God. It is always good to hear from you.

**God: Likewise, I encourage people to talk to me as often as they can!**

Jon: Hey God.

**God: Mother God.**

Jon: Right, Hey Mother God.

**God: Yes, my child.**

Jon: Could we say a prayer?

**God: I'd like that. But you lead it, you're the pastor...**

Jon: Fair enough. Let's pray: God whose Spirit leads us into wilderness places. Be gentle when we are lost and afraid, and be firm with us when we are being stubborn. Nurture us and transform us on this Lenten path as we follow Christ. Ground us in faith and help us to learn to depend on you. By the power of your Holy Spirit we pray, amen.