

“From Security to Generosity”: Seeking God’s Way in the Wilderness
A Sermon preached by Zac Klassen at Bloomingdale Mennonite Church, March 6th, 2022

Good morning,

As Linda already mentioned, today we begin our Lenten journey with a worship series that is meant to draw us into the transformative and at times uncomfortable task of seeking God’s ways. This morning, on this first Sunday in the series, we find ourselves being led by the Spirit to seek God’s ways *in the wilderness*. As I was preparing this sermon and spending time looking through scripture, I was quite surprised at just how much of the biblical story takes place in the wilderness. It is in the barren, deserted, and oftentimes harsh places of the wilderness that the people of God encounter God powerfully, find themselves and their faith tested, and experience God’s generous provision and blessing.

Think, for example, of Abraham, who was a nomad, a “wandering Aramean” who was trying to seek God’s ways in directions he could not predict ahead of time—all he had was the promise that God would make of him a great nation. Think of Hagar and Ishmael, who were met by God in the frightening wilderness after they had been cast away by Abraham and Sarah with nowhere to go. God provided for them in the wilderness and promised to make of Ishmael, too, a great nation. Think of Moses & the people of Israel as they wandered for 40 years in the wilderness after being miraculously delivered from slavery in Egypt. In the wilderness, God provided for their daily needs and then gave them the law as a gift and as grace to guide them as a covenant people as they moved into the land where they would settle. Think, too, of King David. While we might often associate David with the glory days of the established and secure Kingdom of Israel, David too spent extensive time in the wilderness of Judah where he wrote several of his Psalms, such as Psalm 63, a Psalm that speaks of seeking and thirsting for God as

in a dry and weary land where there is no water and yet also in that place declares God's steadfast love.

Think of the prophet Elijah, who at a low and depressing point in his prophetic ministry, went into the wilderness ready to give up on life. There he had a dramatic encounter with God in the "sheer silence" that followed the intense wilderness weather of winds, an earthquake, and fire. Think of the visions of the prophet Isaiah, who saw the way of the Lord as moving along a path through the wilderness, bringing renewal and new life. Think, too, of John the Baptist who appeared in the wilderness of Judea speaking those same words of Isaiah: "Prepare the way of the Lord, make straight his paths." These many examples of wilderness journeys and experiences throughout scripture make it clear that the people of God today, no less than yesterday, should expect that God's ways will lead us into wilderness spaces, for it is often in the wilderness, where our usual comforts and securities are absent, that God meets us, provides for us, and transforms us.

But by and large, us human beings generally like to avoid the wilderness. The wilderness is a barren place – even a dangerous place, a place of vulnerability and unpredictability where our weaknesses and insecurities are exposed, where we are pushed not only to physically uncomfortable places, but to those uncomfortable places within ourselves that we'd rather avoid. Today, in the Gospel reading from Luke, we are drawn into a significant moment in Jesus' life where he, like many in Israel before him, was led in a barren wilderness, where he too had to face his own insecurities and his own temptations. I couldn't help but notice just how big of a contrast this wilderness setting is compared to the scene just before this. Just prior to Jesus' entry into the wilderness he had been baptized by John in the Jordan and had heard the comforting and affirming words from heaven: "you are my Son, the beloved, with who I am well pleased."

These are words of security, love, and promise: “You are mine.” “I love you.” “You make me happy.” Why, we might wonder, was Jesus not able to simply launch into his ministry serving God from this high point of affirmation from God? Why did he need to go into the wilderness to be ready to live into his calling?

Here it helps to remember that with the words “You are my son,” Jesus was not only affirmed as God’s beloved and made secure in God’s love and promise but was also claimed for God—and this claiming carried with it significant implications: Jesus is now committing himself in service to God and to the divine mission God had in store for him. Would he take the affirmation and love declared to him and root himself in that love, trusting that God would bless and keep him in both the green pastures of life and in the valley of the shadow of death? Or would he look for ways to secure his life against all threats by taking control; would he do everything possible in *his* power to make his story turn out the way *he* wanted by following his own ways? It is easy for us who know the story to say, “of course he is going to trust God! Right to the bitter end.” But, when we read a text like ours for today, it helps to try, however impossible it may be to do so, to suspend our knowledge of how the story goes. When reading the story of Jesus in the desert, we have to try to summon that unsettling feeling in the pit of your stomach that you get when you get to a particularly tense part of a good book or a movie and don’t know what the outcome will be. To really get the sense for the drama of Jesus’ story, we have to keep open the question: “Will he trust and live fully for God?”

This question, after all, was the open question that Israel faced again and again in its long history. Think of when God delivered Israel from Egypt. Their deliverance was a kind of baptism, you might say, a journey through the waters of the sea where they died to their life of slavery under Pharaoh and were brought through the waters to a new freedom and security. How

would they use their new-found freedom and security? Would they use their freedom *for* God, or would they use it to be free *from* God to go their own way? Freedom—a political term that is quite loaded in our current context (perhaps it has always been loaded), was never meant to be understood negatively for Israel as simply *freedom from* Pharaoh, but positively as *freedom for* serving God—they were liberated to the end and for the purpose that they would now serve God and God alone. Would Israel do it? Would they trust God and offer themselves up to God as generous offerings, or would they go after other Gods and seek false forms of freedom and security? This was the question Israel faced as it entered the desert where they were tested. We know, of course, that Israel struggled in the wilderness. They often failed to trust in God. They complained about lack of food and water. They built a golden calf. Throughout the Hebrew scriptures, Israel’s wilderness experience re-appears again and again as a reference point for leaders and prophets to admonish the people to trust in God – “don’t do as our ancestors did in the wilderness where they grumbled against God and tested God. Remember when we passed through the wilderness and remember how, despite our rebellion, God provided.”

Imagine, many years later when a first-century Rabbi, who knew his scriptures deeply and who had begun to discern that God had a divine mission for his life, found himself tired and hungry in the barren wilderness. The rich significance of his setting would *not* have been lost on him even if it would have brought him little comfort. He knew full well that he was there to face temptation, just like Israel, and that his response to that temptation would determine whether he would be living into the way God had for him or whether he would be going his own way. In our scripture reading for today, we heard 3 separate temptations that Jesus faced: turn stones to bread to satisfy his hunger, worship the devil to acquire worldly the world’s kingdoms, and throw himself down from the pinnacle of the temple to test God’s provision and promise.

The first two of these temptations should be very familiar to us as we think about Israel's own temptations in the desert. What did Israel grumble about? "There's no food and no water here! Let's take matters into our own hands and head back to Egypt!" What did God ask of them? Trust me, I will provide. What is the first temptation thrown at Jesus?: "Take matters into your own hands. Provide for yourself! You are the Son of God, after all...or are you? If you are, you'll turn that stone into bread." Notice how the devil appeals to the words of affirmation spoken to Jesus at his baptism: "You are my Son, with whom I am well pleased" says God, and now the devil says, "well, if that's the case, then take what's rightfully yours! As God's son, surely it is your right. Take control."

Jesus' response: "It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone'" is a direct quotation from Deuteronomy where it says that Israel's wilderness experience was meant to "humble them" and remind them that they do not live by bread alone but by the Word of God's promise. In fact, our scripture reading from Deuteronomy today helped to re-enforce this same point. When Israel was to enter the land, they were to offer the first fruits of their labour as a sign of humility, generosity, and a constant reminder that it is in God that they find their life and security, not in their own grasping and possessing. While we don't have time to unpack it right now, I have to wonder how Israel might have entered the land and engaged their new indigenous Canaanite neighbours differently if they had not sought to grasp and possess the land of promise by force—if they had been patient enough for God to provide bread for fellowship with those inhabitants, rather than using the stone of violent displacement to inherit the land¹. By referencing this passage from Deuteronomy in the face of temptation, Jesus chooses humility and

¹ Of course, the tension here is that scripture declares that God commands the Canaanites be killed and displaced. This tension could be the occasion for an important conversation regarding the way that we are called to interpret scripture.

trust; he refuses to trade the word of God's promise for the momentary security and comfort that comes from taking matters into his own hands with his own God-given power.

What about the second temptation? What did Israel do when Moses had been gone for a long time and they were sure that this time they had surely been abandoned? They looked for a new earthly medium through which to cry out to God and built a golden calf to be their 'god,' to give them security and a way out of their predicament. What was the second temptation thrown at Jesus? Worship the devil and he will give you the security and authority of all the kingdoms of the world—they will all be yours! Jesus' response: "It is written, worship the Lord your God, and serve only him"² is again a direct quotation from Deuteronomy. There Israel is reminded to *not* repeat what they did in the wilderness when they built the golden calf. In resisting this temptation, Jesus refuses to trade false worship for worldly power, authority, and security.

What about the third temptation? Throw yourself down from the pinnacle of the temple! Wouldn't you really prove yourself to be the expected Messiah if you appeared so dramatically within the temple and without even dashing your foot against one of its stones? Jesus' response: "It is written, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test'" is, you guessed it, from Deuteronomy again and again with reference to Israel's time in the wilderness. The question underlying the devil's suggestion to Jesus in this instance is directed right at the heart of Jesus' upcoming mission and ministry: what is God's way for you as you live into your calling as Son of God? By rejecting the devil's suggestion that he jump into the temple, Jesus refused to believe that God's mission for him was to follow a kind of dramatic and powerful entry and take-over of the temple precinct.² Evidently, Jesus already had the sense that God's call on his life would lead him in

² Scholars debate exactly what is behind this temptation. Possibilities range from a "signs and wonders" interpretation, to ideas about people being thrown from the pinnacle if they blasphemed. If this latter interpretation is correct, the devil's suggestion is that Jesus show that even though people call him a blasphemer,

more humble, down to earth ways of serving God among the people of the countryside. And then, when Jesus finally enters Jerusalem later, we recall that he does so on a donkey; and when he finally enters the temple later, he does so with a whip, not in a dramatic free-fall from the temple heights surrounded by angels.

Whew. Jesus did it. He resisted temptation. He made it out of the wilderness in 40 days instead of 40 years! Did you have any doubt? Now that we feel relieved that Jesus made it out of the wilderness, however, let me ask you to join me in a thought experiment: What if Jesus had avoided the wilderness entirely? What would it have meant if Jesus had intentionally avoided the wilderness? Let's pretend for a moment that Luke's account of Jesus' wilderness journey was suddenly cut from scripture. See if you can notice where it was removed. The story in Luke would go something like this:

Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." . . . Then Jesus . . . returned to Galilee, and a report about him spread through all the surrounding country. He began to teach in their synagogues and was praised by everyone.³

Did you notice at which point the wilderness experience was removed? Ok, let me read it one more time. (*Read*) Did anything change, for you, when you heard these verses without the 13 verses of wilderness experience? I don't know about you, but when I read it this way, I couldn't help but think that without the wilderness experience, Jesus might have heard the glowing "reports about him" spreading throughout the countryside or the "praise" given him by everyone

God vindicates him. There is also debate as to whether the suggestion was to jump *into* the temple precinct or *outside* of the temple.

³ I have intentionally removed the "full of the Holy Spirit" in 4:14 here as a suggestive interpretation/thought experiment to highlight the idea of how Jesus may or may not have been open to the Spirit's work if he would have avoided the wilderness.

and thought, “Hey! I did this! My hard work and skill has brought me respect! I’ve got this under control! I am leading my people to the kingdom!” I wonder, if Jesus had not been humbled by his own wilderness experience, might he have not been prepared for the future “opportune” times that the devil would tempt him with more suggestions about how he might secure his own kingdom on earth? The wilderness experience taught Jesus to find his security and well-being in the provision and generosity of the God who called him child, rather than in his own power to secure his future. Having found his security in God alone, Jesus was himself free to live a life of generous self-giving in service to God rather than selfishly securing of his own identity and reputation over against other worldly actors. By embracing the wilderness experience, Jesus learned that he did not need to compete for space with others to secure his own identity and to bring in the kingdom of God.

The wilderness experience was necessary for Jesus as he lived into his calling as Son of God and, dear family of God, it is necessary for us too as we live into our calling as children of God and disciples of Jesus. We too are being led by the Spirit in the wilderness in this Lenten season. Perhaps some of us feel like we have had far too much wilderness lately. After 2 years of a global pandemic combined with the recent anxiety that has come with a stark increase in global unrest, we might wonder if there is any way out of this wilderness. Reflecting on this wilderness time, what might we say our temptations have been both personally and as a church during this wilderness time? Have we had to fight the suggestions that God must have abandoned us and that we would be better off if we just took matters into our own hands? Has it been hard to trust that God has been with us and provided for us, even in the barrenness of this landscape?

On the other hand, perhaps some of us are feeling optimistic at the moment; perhaps we feel like we have started to see the border of the wilderness; perhaps we even feel like we can

spy a new land of “promise” on the horizon. There are temptations that come with this optimism too—the temptation, for example, to run with haste out of the wilderness in order to take the promise by force as if it was ours to possess instead of letting the wilderness teach us how to enter the promise with humility; to teach us how to find our security in God and so refuse the endless competition for space in this fractured world; to teach us how to generously share the promise with our neighbours. In this Lenten season, whether we find ourselves still wandering lost and hungry in the wilderness or on the threshold to a place of new promise, may we trust and rely upon the provision of the God who makes fertile fields grow from the most barren of landscapes; the God whose generosity makes a way through the wilderness, and gives us what we need to live into our identity as children of God, with whom God is well pleased. AMEN