

**SLD02.25.07 First Lent**  
**Luke 4:1- 13**  
**Emory Presbyterian Church**  
**Jill Oglesby Evans**

### **“Wrestling with the Wilderness”**

This first Sunday of Lent places us with Jesus in the middle of the wilderness. This seems appropriate since for seekers who take it seriously, Lent can be a kind of wilderness. A kind of wilderness of the soul, if you will. At least for those who slow down enough to examine their soul. Or remember they have one.

I don't mean to be glib. It's just that we're busy people. And the examination of one's heart, or soul, or faith takes time. Quiet time. Still time. Time bracketed just for silence. And honest, quiet listening. And a certain patience, as well, to put up with the wilderness that's often experienced during such a time.

Because no matter how noble our intentions, it can be a wilderness in here (head), and in here (heart),

Even those of us who intentionally make some time for Lenten reflection find ourselves restless, squirmy, and plagued by random itches and unwelcome thoughts. Time dedicated to self-reflection and communing with God is rarely remotely quiet.

'Cause truth is, most of us aren't cut out for the wilderness, of either the exterior or the interior variety. For obvious reasons, the wilderness just doesn't fit tidily into the routine of our lives; our quotidian is simply not equipped for it. So unless we're guilted into it, or maybe motivated by that deep yearning that surfaces from time to time for a “God-moment,” it's pretty tempting just not to fool with the wilderness at all.

Jesus, on the other hand, isn't given the choice of whether or not to fool with the wilderness. You see, when John baptizes Jesus in the Jordan, the heavens open up and the Holy Spirit comes flying down like a dove and enters Jesus, and God hollers out for everyone to hear about how Jesus is God's beloved one with whom God was well pleased. You recall, God said the same thing last week during Jesus' Transfiguration, only this time no special instructions follow, like telling Peter to hush and listen. This time God just issues a public service announcement about who Jesus is, and lets the Spirit do the rest.

And what the Spirit does, of course, is what the Spirit can be counted on to do, which is to lead Jesus into the wilderness. **[If I can get Emily (or someone else) to do it, I may have her be the Spirit and lead Robert out.]** For the wilderness is the Holy Spirit's playground. Oh yes, the Holy Spirit just *loves* the chaos and creativity of the wilderness. A day in the wilderness is a field day to the Holy Spirit, when school's out, the banks are closed, and the Spirit is free to blow where she will. (As before, in this sermon I'm going to refer to both the Holy Spirit and the devil as female. Just a convention.) In any case, all the wilderness is a stage for the Holy Spirit; creative chaos is the script, with the drama always pointing inexorably toward the will of God.

Of course, Jesus may not have been that keen on the idea. **[here, Robert, you will resist]** After all, he's got work to do – disciples to gather, people to heal, authorities to annoy. It might have been pretty tempting for him to postpone his wilderness sojourn to a more convenient season.

But then again, like I said, it's not like Jesus has any choice. Once the Holy Spirit descends upon a body, you've pretty much got to follow her lead. That's just the way it

is. So the Holy Spirit leads Jesus directly into the wilderness, do not pass Jerusalem, do not collect twelve disciples. For it will be in the wilderness that Jesus will sort out who he is and what he's meant to be up to.

Now according to Luke, Jesus is in the wilderness for 40 days, and doesn't eat a thing. At the end of that time, needless to say, although scripture does say, he is quite famished. **[Robert sits down and looks miserable.]** And it's right at that point, at the very end of Jesus' marathon fast, when he's finally made it to the end of his wilderness retreat and is the very hungriest, looking the most forward to a nice roasted leg of lamb, when the devil shows up **[Enter Mary with a large stone and a loaf of bread]** to tempt Jesus to turn a stone to bread.

Now for me this scenario underscores just why the Devil has such a bad reputation. I mean, Jesus is *hungry*. He's just made it through a 40 day fast, he's paid his dues, presumably learned whatever it is God wants him to learn, and Satan shows up a vision of carbohydrates? Of *comfort* food? Homemade bread straight from Karen's kitchen? Still warm? Sitting next to a slab of butter? **[Mary picks up butter and wafts it before Robert]**

Scripture doesn't mention butter but you and I both know how Satan works – there had to be butter. Freshly churned. Soft. Ready to be spread on the warm aromatic bread Jesus could turn that stone into if he wanted to.

And that's what I call satanic.

Although Jesus, after contemplating the devil's mouthwatering "stone for bread" option, nobly shifts the debate from what will give satisfaction in the moment to the very Source of Life itself.

**Robert: “It is written that man shall not live by bread alone, but by everything that proceeds from the mouth of the Lord.”**

Never mind warm, buttered homemade bread after 40 days of fasting, Jesus would rather quote Moses from the book of Deuteronomy (8:3b) than have any part of what proceeds from the mouth of the devil. Atta Messiah.

Whereupon the Devil, seeing that the way to Jesus’ soul is clearly not through his stomach, moves to Plan B. Leading Jesus up to a high place to show him all the kingdoms of the world, the devil says, **[Mary takes Robert’s hand and leads him to the top of the steps and around the chancel. ]**

**Mary: To you I will give all their glory and all this authority; for it has been given over to me, and I give it to anyone I please. If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours.**

All the kingdoms of the world, all the powers and principalities, all the board rooms and governing chambers, all the political pundits and military might, the skyscrapers and tall steeples and sports arenas and palatial mansions...

**Mary: “Look, Jesus. It’s all yours. [Waves her arm over the congregation.] Whaddaya say? All you have to do is worship me.”**

Once again Jesus, student of scripture, rabbi, teacher of prophets, responds with words from the prophet Moses (Deut. 6):

**Robert: “It is written, worship the Lord your God, and serve only God!”**

**Mary: “Darn!” [snaps her finger] “Can’t hook with him carbs. Can’t hook him with power. What else have I got? / know. How ‘bout personal security – now *that’s* a good one.”**

And it certainly is! Avoiding harm is big business these days - security alarms, gated communities, personal firearms, Homeland Security.... And why not? Who likes to get hurt?

**Mary: “What’s more, I know *just* how to go about, too – Jesus ain’t the *only* authority on scripture around here. ‘Hey, Jesus! Ya wanna quote scripture? How ‘bout this one? Says right here in Psalm 91:11-12 that God puts angels in charge of you, to guard you and bear you up...look here...’lest you strike your foot against a stone.’ Isn’t that sweet? Scripture says God takes care of you, Jesus, so how ‘bout it? Wanna test it out? How ‘bout you throw yourself off this temple roof here and let’s see how reliable holy scripture is. Whaddaya say.”**

Oooh, now that had to be tempting. I mean, just one measly jump from the temple roof to shut this joker up. Heck, / want Jesus to go for it, just to wipe that smug look off her face! Besides, what’s to lose?

Well, apparently a lot, because Jesus will not do it. Will not bite the bait and leverage God’s power on the devil’s, or anyone else’s schedule. For that misses the mark entirely! After all, what’s the devil trying to do but to shift Jesus’ motivation, unground him, and distract him from his relationship with God by making make him rise, or in this case, fly, to the occasion, by crafting of scripture an instrument of her demonic manipulation?

**Mary: “You’re the Son of God? Prove it!  
You believe in scripture? Prove it!  
You trust in God? Prove it!”**

How can Jesus resist? Why not offer some proof positive of his divinity, some tangible evidence that the gospel is true? Certainly we believers are forever looking for

it.... And what could have been more satisfying than shutting the devil up once and for all? Yet once again the Holy Spirit guides Jesus to the wisdom of Moses, this time in his words addressed to those hardheaded, apostate, idol-making Israelites –

**Robert: “Do not put the Lord your God to the test.” (Dt. 6:16)**

Do not put the Lord your God to the test. Do not imagine that our God is some divine puppet performing on request. Do not even imagine that our God is “ours” at all, in any sense that we can possess or manage or domesticate God with our desires or demands. Moses taught this, Jesus lived it, and tempted or not, he’s just not going there. **[Robert and Mary sit down]**

So there they are: carbs, power, security – The temptations for Jesus in *his* wilderness. Satisfying his hunger, proving his divinity, asserting his authority – custom-made satanic seductions designed to throw Jesus off course, distract him from his Maker, and lure him toward the ways of the world.

Sometimes I get mixed up in this story about who is Satan and who is Spirit, or at least about Who’s working for Whom. Remember why the Spirit leads Jesus to the wilderness in the first place? To sort out who he is. To discern his call, his ministry, his vocation; what God means him to be up to.

And where else is a body more unmasked and de-persona’d, if you will, than when his hard-core, un-embellished self is pushed smash-faced against the warm and welcoming lips of temptation? So let’s just say that when it comes to leading Jesus to his deepest Self, to his core being, to the height and depth and breadth of who he is and what he’s meant to be up to, the Holy Spirit and Satan make a pretty good team.

For just in case Jesus hadn't gotten it before, you know, from all those neat signs around his birth, or the precocious behavior of his childhood, or the rush of his Spirit-fluttered baptism, or God's cloud-speak, the Spirit and Satan appear to team up to provide one last heaven sent prep-course not just for Messiah-hood but for Jesus' full personhood (which might be closer to the same than we think.)

Oh wait, did I say "one last prep-course?" Hmm, must not have been reading the text closely enough. No, Luke tells us that when the devil had finished every test, he departed from Jesus *until an opportune time*. Guess there ain't no "final" about the wilderness or temptation, either one, as most of us can testify. Seems like there's always something more to learn in the face of what tempts us, what draws us, what moves or inspires or delights us, to the point of distracting us from God. Always something more to tackle, or wrestle, in the wilderness, that has the potential for leading us closer to who God created us to be.

The season of Lent places us once again with Jesus in the middle of the wilderness. Satan and the Holy Spirit are sure to show up and do their thing, just as Jesus will do his. But you and I, what will we do?

To the glory of God. Amen.