

**SLD03.13.11 First Lent**  
**Emory Presbyterian Church**  
**Matthew 4:1-11**  
**Jill Oglesby Evans**

### **“The Place of Breaking”**

I really like our idea to recycle Lenten Devotionals this year. Since we compile or buy new ones every year, seasonal devotions accumulate like Christmas Tree lights – and sooner or later you end up with more than one tree will hold. Never mind more than one tree can supply. So in the interest of saving paper, money and effort, we’re “recycling” previous year’s devotionals. On the back pew and the table out this side door, we spread out all the Lenten wisdom we’ve accrued over the years for you to choose from, sort of like the “free box” at a yard sale.

I don’t know about you but anything “free” at a yard sale invariably piques my interest in a way that even the most modest price does not. When something is offered for free, I feel an obligation, a strong obligation, at least to check it out, as if not at least to *try* to imagine a use for it would be an inexcusably profligate betrayal of my Scottish heritage. The truth is, sometimes I take a yard sale freebie home even when I can’t imagine and immediate a use for it, just because its “freeness” invites new possibilities. Besides, who knows when another cracked vase or pair of faded orange socks might come in handy?

Of course, the shadow side of freeloading is “hoarding,” a rather unattractive sin to which, as those who have been to my house can attest, I am not infrequently subject.

Still, that irresistible invitation to imagine new possibilities....

In any case, the Lenten devotionals spread all around as free as God’s grace, and I hope you’ll choose one and take it home.

I chose two. (Hoarding.)

To accompany me during my daily personal devotions this Lenten season, I chose Henri Nouwen's From Fear to Love, and a devotional from *Presbyterians Today* called "Surely the Lord is in this place."

And I'm likin' 'em so far.

Of course, we're just 5 days into Lent and anybody can keep up a prayer practice for 5 days, right? 40 days? Well, we'll see. Take something on, give something up, like Jesus did, for 40 days? We'll see. Such discipline can break a body, especially one such as myself not so accustomed to sacrificial living.

At the same time, "breaking a body" seems pretty close to what God has in mind when sending folks into the wilderness. By sending Jesus out to the wilderness right after his beatific baptism, it was almost as if God didn't want him to get too soft, too pious, too big-headed about his own belovedness.

"Sure, you're my beloved and all and I'm pleased with you. But don't get any ideas my affection's gonna make life, or a relationship with Me, any easier."

I'm not sure why but I take some comfort in that particular spin on the existential purpose of a wilderness experience. Or maybe just the idea that there is divine purpose in a wilderness sojourn. Otherwise, it'd just be, I don't know, a meaningless drag to endure.

You know, there's a lot going on in this church right now, what with staff changes, budget challenges, facility demands, defecting leaders and the hopeful beginnings of a Capital Campaign. For me, when a whirlwind week also includedsa Taize service on Monday, a PW Bible Study on Tuesday, a Druid Hills High School Advisory Council

meeting and our Ash Wednesday service on Wednesday, a 6 hour Macedonia Meeting on Thursday, and an all out effort on many of our parts to prepare for the 16 church, 90-person Macedonia Ministry conference we hosted yesterday, so much going on can feel overwhelming. Even like a wilderness of demands and expectations.

So I have to say that I approached this first Sunday of Lent with some mixed feelings about the prospect of entering yet another wilderness with Jesus. I'm not sure I've got the energy for another yet wilderness trek. Or maybe the one I'm already in is the wilderness God intends for me.

For surely you'd agree that busyness itself comprises its own sort of wilderness, replete with both angelic and demonic dimensions. Maybe we don't have to make up some new existential wilderness to travel during Lent; maybe the one we're in the middle of will do just fine.

For all the astonishingly fertile, blessed and life-giving aspects of this season of our church's life, maybe it does us good to confess that the challenges and demands of a busy season in a church also has its demonic dimensions. It's nothing new – just the same reality batted back and forth across life's court, with sometimes the angels of initiative and generosity and creativity hitting hard, and other times the demons are serving their pessimism and weariness. When the demons are head, I find myself quite literally fighting panic trying to keep it all together.

And who would argue the demonic nature of any form of panic? But here of late, I've begun suspicioning that my urge to "hold it all together" may be equally wicked. Because bottom line, "holding it all together" is not my job. Nor yours. It's God's.

Easy for me to forget.

Still, in the wildernesses of our quotidian, the urge to “hold it all together” can be a pretty tricky demon to manage. Ah, see?! There it is again! The innate compulsion to “manage” demons! As if anyone can “manage” demons. I mean, the very nature of demons is that they are unmanageable. In fact, part of their demonic method is to trick us into imagining that if we just try harder, work longer, mobilize more resources, we finally *can* manage them!

That’s what the devil does to Jesus in his wilderness: try to seduce him into managing his misery in a manner that shifts the job from God to himself.

“You hungry?” asks the devil (of Jesus who has been fasting for 40 days)  
“Turn these stones to bread!”

“You afraid? Get your God to save you!”

“Feeling a bit forgotten out here? Now, / can make you feel special!”

“Get lost,” replies Jesus, “and get God.”

And suddenly angels come and wait on him.

You and I hear angels and we think “wings.” But, as Ray Greene pointed out the other day after reattaching the wings of our angel in the prayer garden for the umpteenth time, wings on angels were a pagan accrual during Roman times. In Hebrew, the word for angel means “messenger.”

So, when Jesus tells Satan to get lost, what comes to him are not fey, fluttery fairies to wipe the sweat from his furrowed brow, but uncompromising truth in the form of a divine message from God.

And what is that truth?

Well, that's what the season Lent advises us each year to venture into the wilderness to find out for ourselves.

In my first Lenten devotional, Henri Nouwen suggests that the reason we've got to go to the wilderness to be attended by God's angels; that is, to receive God's word for us, is that for us the wilderness becomes what he calls a "place of breaking," without which, Nouwen says, there is no authentic communion with God.

The thing is, I don't prefer to commune with God in brokenness; I prefer to commune with God in bliss. Don't you?

But listen to how Nouwen positions the "place of breaking" in what he calls "the whole movement of Divine Love," a "movement symbolized and summarized, he says, in the sacrament of communion. And what do we do in communion? We take the bread, bless it, break it, and give it away. Just as Jesus was "taken," (chosen) by God, "blessed" by God at his baptism, "broken" by God on the cross, and then "given away" for the salvation of all creation. Just as Jesus takes (chooses) *us* from the beginning of time, blesses *us* in our baptism, breaks *us* in the wildernesses of our lives, and gives *us* away for the salvation of all creation. This is the movement, the pattern, the rhythm, of Divine love – taking, blessing, breaking and giving away.

Now I'm all for the taking/blessing part of the pattern; it's the breaking and giving away part I'm not so keen on because, for one thing ...well...it hurts. Yet "breaking and giving away" seem essential not only to Divine Love but to life itself.

Take human development. The macro swing for the fortunate begins with the nurturing of our early years, followed by the existential wilderness of adolescence and

early adulthood, which is then succeeded by any number of dramatic turns leading to maturity, which usually culminates somehow in the giving away of ourselves to others. .

Take marriage. You've got your sweet period of courtship and choosing, then the blessed event of the weddings, followed by bumbling, humbling rigors of long-term relationship, and, finally, again for the fortunate, the full giving of oneself to another.

Consider any project or goal – there's choosing the objective or motivating ideal of its fulfillment, followed by the challenging realities of what is actually required, followed by the actual end results and how their impact on others.

Take inviting all the Macedonia Ministry churches and elders here for a retreat yesterday. There's the delight of being asked to host such an event, to be given the opportunity to share the hospitality and beauty of our church. Then there's arranging tables and counting silver ware and preparing food and cutting the flowers and cleaning and cooking and decorating and getting here early to meet and greet and running around making sure the day goes smoothly. Then there's the sweet gift of the event itself, of cherished hospitality and shared wisdom and lively community.

Taking, blessing, breaking, and giving away – the rhythm of both Divine Love and human experience, unequivocally observed in the life of the one who most fully, most authentically communed with God. Rather than outside the boundaries of divine love, the “place for breaking” seems to be woven right into the middle of it. What are the chances we could come to regard our own “breaking places” as part of the warp and woof of God's love for us?

Every time we celebrate communion, we take the Bread of Heaven, bless him, break him and give him away to each other and to the world. From our first breath,

Jesus takes us, blesses us, breaks us with all our...Nouwen says, “undeserved”... suffering, and gives us away for the healing of creation.

Taking, blessing, breaking, and giving away – the whole pattern of divine/human relations.

Remarks my other Lenten devotional, “Hopefully, we know that God loves us and wants the best for us. But we are mistaken if we think the best is what is most comfortable or acceptable. What is best for us may prove to be going...where we are strangers, where things are different, even dangerous. In short, what is “best” for us may occur in the “breaking places” of our lives, those wildernesses which challenge, crack, or shatter us, even as they shape, mold and invite us to more authentic communion with God.

I cannot say that I, personally, have become any more tolerant of, never mind affectionate toward, these ubiquitous “breaking places” in my own life. For one thing, they often hurt. But there they are, all piled up in the “free box” at the yard sale of faith and, something’s offered for free, who can resist at least checking it out for new possibilities. I mean, who knows when another cracked heart or pair of faded expectations might come in handy?

To the glory of God. Amen.