

IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

The Reverend David J. Powers
Sunday, January 15, 2023

Matthew 4:1-17

So, friends, our gospel lesson this day comes to us from the gospel of Matthew. Throughout the rest of the spring, even through the season of Lent, we're going to be following something called the Narrative Lectionary, so it is a—there are actually a number of different kinds of lectionaries: the revised common lectionary is the one you're probably familiar with. Narrative gives a different spin on things. We encourage you to maybe spend a little time googling Narrative Lectionary. It'll teach you a little bit about what it is. We will be following these lessons from the gospel of Matthew throughout the rest of the spring. We'll take some time off in the summer and do a series and then back to it in the fall. So our lesson this day comes from the fourth chapter of the gospel of Matthew, beginning in the first verse and ending in the 17th verse. We already heard a bit of a preview of it during the time of the younger church so I invite you to listen with new ears to hear this story.

Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tested by the devil. He fasted for forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished. The tempter came and said to him, 'If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread.' But he answered, 'It is written, "One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God."'

Then the devil took him to the holy city and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, 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."' Jesus said to him, 'Again it is written, "Do not put the Lord your God to the test."'

Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor; and he said to him, 'All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me.' Then Jesus said to him, 'Away with you, Satan! for it is written, "Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him."' Then the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him.

Now when Jesus heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew to Galilee. He left Nazareth and made his home in Capernaum by the lake, in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali, so that what had been spoken through the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled:

'Land of Zebulun, land of Naphtali, on the road by the sea, across the Jordan, Galilee of the

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Gentiles—the people who sat in darkness have seen a great light, and for those who sat in the region and shadow of death, light has dawned.’

From that time Jesus began to proclaim, ‘Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.’
The grass withers, and the flower fades, but the word of our Lord endures forever. Amen.

So I'd get up at seven o'clock in the morning each summer, not quite sure as the child I believed in God at 7:00 am in the morning. It was incredibly early. If you remember being a child, anything really before nine or ten, for me at least, was early; but I'd get up and I'd get on the BMX bike that my parents had gotten me when I was about eight years old, and I would ride these steep hills from the back of our subdivision in Greenville to the front where the pool was. I was one of the Sharks on the Silver Leaf swim team. Anybody else do swim team growing up? OK. In Greenville we had neighborhood swim teams, and so each different group had a different name, and we were pretty competitive with each other. Coach Price was our swim team coach from the time I was about seven to the time I was 12. Coach Price was a rigid, rigid man. He would greet us each morning with a whistle that pierced the pre-dawn hours, and he'd tell us, “Get in the water.” We would say, “It’s cold,” and he would say, “I don't care.”

And we would practice. We'd warm up—first going back and forth, uh and it would get warm, and then every morning we would practice entering the water. We'd get up on those starting blocks, and we would practice our dives into the pool. Most of us would kind of belly flop into the pool and then start flailing our arms, and we would call that freestyle, and that'd be fine, right, and he would make us get out of the water and get back on the block and practice again. Our dives were incredibly important to him. He was emphatic about this. He said, “Your first move is your most important move. The way you start is going to determine how you finish. If you want to win, you have to start really well.”

He was intense for a child's swim team, but we practiced. Over and over we'd practice those dives. We practiced our starting, because he drilled into our head that beginnings were really important; but the lesson that he taught us—it never really rang true for me—the way you start is going to determine how you finish. There was so much ahead in the race on the journey. I couldn't figure out why we would even keep swimming if we made our first dive and it wasn't exactly how it needed to be, if how we started was going to determine how we finished; and at the same time though, I knew it was somewhat true. You ask a sprinter—those first two to three steps out of the block are the most critical for a race, those first few strides. After some wrestling here's the lesson that I settled on: how and where you begin says a lot about what the rest of the journey is going to look like. How and where you begin says a lot about what the rest of the journey is going to look like. So Jesus comes out of the water. Scripture tells us that the spirit of God descends like a dove and a light upon Jesus; and then a voice from Heaven, God's voice speaks from heaven and says, “This is my son, the beloved. With him I am well pleased.” And in a flash that same spirit that

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descended like a dove carries Jesus out into the wilderness, leads him into that place. Scripture says that Jesus spent 40 days there. At the end of that 40 days, he was tired and he was hungry. You can imagine he was worn down. Maybe you've been in a place like that, maybe you've been out in the wilderness for a while trying to figure out what is going on in your life and your family and your work, and you're tired. That's where Jesus was.

And then the devil shows up, or the tempter. I like the translation in our new NRSV. The tempter shows up with a whole bunch of options rather than faithfulness.

In 1979 Bob Dylan released an album entitled *Slow Train Coming*. The first track on that album was a not so subtle warning to the listeners entitled *Gotta Serve Somebody*. "You may be an ambassador to England or France, you may like to gamble, you may like to dance, you may be the heavyweight champion of the world. You may be a socialite with a long string of pearls, but you're going to have to serve somebody. You're going to have to serve somebody. Well, it may be the devil or it may be the Lord, but you're going to have to serve somebody."

I'm not sure where Dylan penned that song.

But I imagine given the rest of the songs on the album, and the way in which faith was woven so deeply into so much of his songwriting, he must have thought about this scene. Jesus is famished and the tempter shows up, and the question before Jesus is what voice he is going to listen to and what the rest of the journey is going to look like.

And we get this beautiful response, one that if we're honest, we probably envy. We get the response of our savior who's able to quote scripture back to the tempter and avoid the temptation three times.

He's hungry, and he decides not to turn stone into bread.

He can gain the entire world if he just worships at the feet of the tempter, and he knows that that world which he is being sold is not true. How and where Jesus begins his ministry says a lot about what the rest of the journey is going to look like. And that's really important for us as God's people in this day, because there are wildernesses all around us.

Now, wilderness, it can be personal, it can be communal. Maybe you came in this morning in your own kind of wilderness. That's the interesting part about Christian community. We don't know what wilderness people are walking through when they come into this sanctuary. Maybe your wilderness is the next round of chemo or radiation. Maybe your wilderness is a new semester at school trying to finish up a degree. Maybe it's embarking upon confirmation like 13 of our young people will do today. Maybe it's navigating a divorce or caring for an ailing parent or spouse. Maybe your wilderness is waiting on fertility results or starting a new job.

Jesus positions himself in the wilderness, allows himself to be led by the spirit there.

And what we recognize in this story is that when we are in wilderness, there will be resistance. There will be temptation. There will be the even well-meaning person who

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encourages us to take a shortcut, who encourages us to take something lesser than what we ought to strive for.

The truth of wilderness is that there will come a point when we will have to decide which voice we are going to listen to.

Jesus begins in the wilderness, and he shows us what faithful response looks like. He's tired, he's hungry, and he falls back into the love and the provision of God.

There's personal wilderness, but there's also communal wilderness. You know in a few moments Julie Markham's going to stand up here, and she's going to tell us all about some wonderful formation opportunities for adults, opportunities for us to learn a whole lot about our faith, for us to study together, read scripture together, pray together.

Those are, each of them, uniquely different wildernesses, different opportunities for us to dive deeper into our faith journey.

There's other communal wilderness that we will have to navigate together too. We, next month, will be spending four Wednesdays from 6 to 7:30, navigating a grief workshop together that will be a different kind of wilderness for us. Later we'll continue our work of anti-racism with a new class offering a different kind of wilderness for us to navigate together.

And there will be plenty of excuses for us not to journey into that wilderness.

The good news of the gospel is that Jesus has gone before us into that wilderness. That's at least one of the things that we learn this morning, that Jesus is there in the wilderness to meet you and to meet me and to walk with us. Jesus is there to be a counter voice to the one that would have you give in or give up.

The lesson of the wilderness is that beginnings are really significant.

The truth is that how we begin the new thing that God is doing will determine a lot about what the rest of the journey is going to look like. But as people of faith we believe that no step taken in faith is wasted, not by a God who makes all things new. So here's what I don't know. I don't know what wilderness you're navigating this morning. I don't know if it has to do with your health. I don't know how it has to do with your faith, your marriage, your work, but what I do know is that Jesus has gone into that wilderness with you. Jesus is there to be a voice of encouragement, to give an example of what it looks like to remain faithful even when you're tired and worn down, when you're famished spiritually or physically.

And what I do know is that he begins his journey in the wilderness so that we might know we are never alone there.

Jesus leaves the wilderness, and he makes his home in this little town next to the Sea of Galilee.

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It was the end of a 14 mile hike I was walking in something called the Jesus Trail. My friend and I had come across this really steep cliff called Arbell. We made our way down to a road that runs just along the Sea of Galilee. We had about four and a half more miles to go to reach Capernaum. We got there and the gates to the city were closed, but there was a guard there, and we asked if we could just step in for a few minutes. So he opened it up, and we went in, and we just walked around for a little bit. And we saw the the place where they say Jesus was present when friends dropped another friend through a thatched roof. We got to see the temple that they had built there, this beautiful sanctuary in this place; and all I could think about was how Jesus had made his way there just after being tempted in the wilderness. He made his way to be among people, among community. He didn't go off again by himself. He took these lessons and he brought them to the people. He said I'm with you here in this place. And from that starting place, from that beginning, we get to see revealed to us the incredible story of God incarnate, walking with us, teaching us what it looks like to love and to care and to hope in this world. So here's my hope for you today—that you will know that you are not alone in the wilderness and that Jesus is with you there and that you will have the courage to share your wilderness with this community so that we will know together that we are in this journey of faith as one body in Christ. Friends, we are going to have a time of silent reflection, maybe 20 30 seconds, and then we're going to invite you to rise in body or spirit, and in honor of Martin Luther King Jr., we are going to sing one of his favorite hymns together. It's a hymn that speaks, I believe, of what it means to persevere with God in the midst of wilderness. So let us reflect and then let us sing.