

**First Congregational United Church of Christ:
The First Sunday in Lent, February 18, 2024**

Mark 1:9-15 Common English Bible

Jesus is baptized and tempted

About that time, Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee, and John baptized him in the Jordan River. While he was coming up out of the water, Jesus saw heaven splitting open and the Spirit, like a dove, coming down on him. And there was a voice from heaven: “You are my Son, whom I dearly love; in you I find happiness.”

At once, the Spirit forced Jesus out into the wilderness. He was in the wilderness for forty days, tempted by Satan. He was among the wild animals, and the angels took care of him.

Jesus’ message

After John was arrested, Jesus came into Galilee announcing God’s good news, saying, “Now is the time! Here comes God’s kingdom! Change your hearts and lives, and trust this good news!”

The title of my message today is “*Testing!*”

Pastor Mary Jo Laabs, pulpit

Let us pray: Holy One, are you testing me? This broken world is really bringing me down. My broken heart is waking me at night. My friends and family are passing into your hands. It looks and feels like winter again. Can’t we work this out, oh God? Just one daffodil, please. Some good news, once or twice?? Let the sun shine on my face again. Let me SHINE for someone who needs my time and my good intentions.

Lead me out of this wilderness, even if it is a little every day, during these next 37 days...no, wait, I’m not making a deal with you... This is my commitment to do better, to hope better, to love better... with no *condition*, and to set my feet more solidly on this yet-a-little-slippery *ground of faith*. AMEN.

After praying those words, I guess this message could be over... But it’s not. ☺

In today’s scripture, Mark moves quite quickly. In the blink of an eye, Jesus travels from Nazareth to the Jordan River...blink again. He is baptized and God speaks, “This is my beloved Son.” Blink again and Jesus is being tempted in the wilderness. John is arrested. Poof! What?

If this were *the only* account of Jesus’ first public appearance, we would not know what Paul Harvey used to call, “*the rest of the story*” in the Gospel of Matthew that includes John’s attempt to make Jesus *the baptizer* and not him; and the debate between Jesus and the devil in the wilderness that is written in the Gospel of Luke.

Here is the *rest of the wilderness story* as recorded by Luke 4:1-13 CEB

¹Jesus returned from the Jordan River full of the Holy Spirit and was led by the Spirit into the wilderness. ²There, he was tempted for forty days by the devil. He ate nothing during those days and afterward Jesus was starving. ³The devil said to him, “Since you are God’s Son, command this stone

to become a loaf of bread.” ⁴Jesus replied, “**It’s written, *People won’t live only by bread.***”

⁵Next, the devil led him to a high place and showed him in a single instant all the kingdoms of the world. ⁶The devil said, “I will give you this whole domain and the glory of all these

kingdoms. It's been entrusted to me, and I can give it to anyone I want. ⁷ Therefore, if you will worship me, it will all be yours."

⁸ Jesus answered, **"It's written, *You will worship the Lord, your God, and serve only him.*"**

⁹ The devil brought him into Jerusalem and stood him at the highest point of the temple. He said to him, "Since you are God's Son, throw yourself down from here; ¹⁰ for it's written: *He will command his angels concerning you, to protect you* ¹¹ and *they will take you up in their hands so that you won't hit your foot on a stone.*" ¹² Jesus answered, **"It's been said, Don't test the Lord, your God."**

¹³ After finishing every temptation, the devil departed from him until the next opportunity.

As we picture this wilderness story, we have a starting place for our own personal journey during these days of Lent. What has been "wilderness" for you? Sitting in a hospital waiting room? Walking around a parking lot to find your car? Searching for a new job? Looking at a report card that isn't so good. Driving on Hwy 41 in a snow squall? Navigating this interim time before Pastor Katherine arrives? We have all been in that place between what we claim is normal and the "somewhere out there" location that God is leading us to.

Looking back, I believe that we all could agree that wilderness times have actually prepared us to be ready for what was ahead of us.

*Barbara Brown Taylor describes wilderness as this: *"It may even have been a kind of desert in the middle of your own chest, where you begged for a word from God and heard nothing but the wheezing bellows of your own breath.*

Wildernesses come in so many shapes and sizes that the only way you can really tell you are in one, is to look around for what you normally count on to save your life and come up empty. No food. No earthly power. No special protection--just a Bible-quoting devil and a whole bunch of sand. "

I have been a member of the United Church of Christ for 39 years now, and I do not ever remember hearing or preaching a sermon in which the preacher talked about a "bible quoting devil." Here, in the UCC, we tend not to dwell too much on the subject of the devil. We use the words of scripture to lift us and encourage us. We hear the words of Jesus and are inspired to help one another to feel his presence in our daily lives. We try to do the best we can to live as his disciples. We tend to ignore the fact that the devil is hanging around and *nudging us* do things and to leave things un-done...

Have you seen the movie, "the Passion of the Christ"? In it, the image of the devil...a dark, wispy figure with a pale face and sunken eyes, in a black hood and a flowing robe... steals through the crowd when they are shouting "crucify him!" The silhouette smugly follows Peter as he denies Jesus three times, and taunts Judas as he agonizes over what *he has done*. The smirking, *well pleased* devil looks on over Mary's shoulder as Jesus is carrying his cross, bleeding and in misery. The images there bring home the reality that the devil could very well be looking over our shoulders as well, waiting for an opportune time.

Today's Gospel story has not come from the imagination of Mel Gibson, but from the words of the Gospel. Only two of the four gospels give this longer version of Jesus' temptation in the

wilderness. John leaves it out altogether and Mark's gospel covers the whole thing in two sentences: Mark 1:12-13

In the short or long version, the Spirit drives Jesus out into the wilderness for forty days. Even then, there is no indication that Jesus was trying to find a way out of the wilderness. He said, "No," to every opportunity that the devil offered.

IN TIMES OF OUR OWN WILDERNESS, we might have felt as though we were being tested and struggled to find a way out. There were doubts. We thought God had abandoned us. Perhaps the devil was there prodding us, too...to think that there is NO WAY OUT. We can't explain exactly how, but by God's grace, God's love has carried us through. We whisper, "Thanks!"

During Lent, the Church wakes us from our winter angst and directs our attention to the joy of our salvation. Let's find that joy in the company of our church family as together, we take part in the practices that enable us to walk with Jesus through these 40 days. Let the scripture, the symbols, the sound of music, and the traditions of Holy Week and Palm Sunday, lead us to a joyful celebration of the Resurrection.

I invite you, during this season of Lent...to take a "voluntary" trip to the wilderness. While you are there, ponder the words of scripture. Take home one of the Lenten devotionals that are available in the narthex and read a page every day. Spend some time in conversation with God. Take time to sit in a quiet place, center yourself in prayer and tune into the silence. Deprive yourself of something and give it to someone one who needs it more. Pause before the symbol of the cross and humbly bow in its shadow. Then turn around and seek out something good to do.

These days of Lent need not be a burden, or a test. Look to the wilderness around us as **one** of the most opportune times for **the Spirit to lead us and guide us.**

My friends, may this wilderness time be different this year.

When Jesus came out of the desert, and as he stepped into his public ministry, these were his words: *"The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news."* NRSV

The "rest of our personal story" is not about passing a series of tests, but, it is about our intentions to be renewed as we do our best to minister to one another in Jesus' name.

Take a deep breath...let it out. Amen.

*Some ideas from: The Wilderness Exam The Rev. Barbara Brown Taylor, TEC Piedmont College and Columbia Theological Seminary

Benediction

Thank you for joining in worship today...

Go now... knowing that blessings, like God's love, are not one-way experiences. As we have been blessed with the mark of God's love, we are called to go out from this place and be a blessing to others.

In other words, as a friend of mine once said,

"You are beloved. Now, get to work!" -Kerri Parker

