

Sermon on Matthew 4:1-11

There was a season in my ministry when I found myself in the wilderness. It wasn't a physical wilderness. From the outside, everything probably looked pretty normal. I was serving a couple of churches. I was preaching every Sunday, leading meetings, doing good work in the community. But on the inside, I was struggling and feeling a lot of uncertainty. I had people calling the district superintendent to complain about me. Some said I cared too much about "those LGBTQ people." Some said I "just needed to preach the Bible." Some left because they didn't believe a woman should be their pastor at all.

And I remember sitting in Café Appalachia one afternoon after getting another call from my DS to let me know about a complaint he'd gotten (and he was supportive, by the way), and I sat there staring at my computer screen, and thinking a question I had never really allowed myself to think before: Can I actually keep doing this? It was not a question of whether or not I loved God, or whether or not I believed in the Gospel. It was a question of whether or not there was a place for me to serve in a traditional setting. It was one of those moments where everything felt really fragile and uncertain. In that wilderness, there were definitely temptations. There was the temptation to make myself smaller or say less, to tone down the messages I was preaching – the temptation to protect myself and preserve my security. At the root of it was the temptation to stop trusting that God would sustain me.

But wilderness has a way of revealing what we really trust. It forces us to ask questions like: Is God enough? Or do I need something else to save me? And it was in that wilderness season that I began, slowly, to discover something. That my calling was not sustained by approval, it was sustained by God. Eventually I found my way out of that wilderness with a greater sense of clarity and calling, in spite of the obstacles and temptations I found there.

And that's where we find ourselves this morning, in the story of wilderness temptation. Every year, on the first Sunday of Lent, we follow Jesus into the wilderness, which is not a comfortable place. The wilderness is where our comfortable illusions fall apart. It is where we come face-to-face with what we really trust, where we discover what we truly worship.

That's what this story is about today – because Jesus is not just being tempted to do three bad things, he is being tempted to worship three false idols: the idol of mammon that spews the lie that there is never enough, the idol of spectacle, and the idol of power. These same temptations shape our lives still. We, like Jesus, are asked, what do we worship? And we will find that what we worship will always shape how we love.

It is important to notice how this story begins. It says, "Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness." Jesus did not wander there by mistake. This is not a detour in his ministry, it is preparation. And this happens immediately after his baptism.

Just moments earlier, Jesus had been standing in the Jordan River where the heavens opened, the Spirit descended like a dove, and God spoke, saying “This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.” It is a moment of clarity and of calling. And the very next thing that happens is this wilderness experience. Jesus has just had his identity proclaimed – he knows who he is. And he’s driven into a place where he will experience temptation, where he will wrestle with the question of who he is – of what kind of person he will be, of what kind of Messiah he will become and what kind of kingdom he will build.

For those listening to Matthew’s Gospel, the wilderness would have meant something very specific, because the wilderness is where Israel had been before. For forty years. After their liberation from slavery in Egypt, they wandered in the wilderness, and in that wilderness, they faced the same temptations Jesus faces here. They faced hunger, and they doubted God’s provision. They faced uncertainty, and they demanded proof. They faced fear, and they longed to return to the security of Empire in Egypt, even if it meant slavery. The wilderness was the place where Israel struggled to trust God.

And now Jesus enters the wilderness for forty days, echoing that forty years. Jesus is reliving Israel’s story, but he chooses a different path.

And so Jesus has been fasting for forty days in this wilderness. He is hungry. He’s weak and vulnerable. And the tempter comes to him and says, “If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become bread.” I mean, imagine if you were in Jesus’ shoes – turning stones to bread doesn’t sound like such a bad idea. Surely God understands hunger and wouldn’t begrudge Jesus having a morsel to eat.

But this temptation is not really about bread. It is about trust. It is about whether Jesus believes there is enough. It’s about whether he trusts God to provide, or whether he believes he must secure his own survival. It is the temptation to believe the myth of scarcity. Scarcity tells us there is not enough: not enough resources, not enough security. And scarcity makes us afraid. And when we are afraid, we cling, we hoard, we protect ourselves. We build walls and erect fortresses around what we believe is ours. We begin to believe that everything depends on us.

But Jesus answers, “One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.” Jesus refuses to let fear of scarcity define him. He chooses trust instead.

Then the tempter takes Jesus to the pinnacle of the temple. “Throw yourself down,” he says. Let God catch you. Let everyone see. Let them believe because of the spectacle. This is the temptation to turn faith into performance, much like what we explored on Ash Wednesday. It’s about appearances. This temptation is about proof. It’s about being impressive. But

Jesus refuses again. He says, “Do not put the Lord your God to the test.” Jesus knows that real faith is not built on spectacle, but on relationship. It is built on trust.

And finally, the tempter shows Jesus all the kingdoms of the world. He says, “All of this can be yours, if you bow down and worship me.” This is the temptation of power, the promise of security through control. It’s the promise that if you align yourself with empire, you will be safe. You will be protected. You’ll have the power. But Jesus again refuses. He says, “Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only.” Jesus refuses to worship power, because he knows that whatever you bow to will shape you.

There is a story in Dostoevsky’s *The Brothers Karamazov* that reflects on this wilderness moment. I first read this story called the Grand Inquisitor, in college. In it, one of the brothers tells this story to the other.

In the story, Jesus returns to earth during the Spanish Inquisition. He walks among the people: he heals a blind man, he raises a child from the dead. And the people recognize him. But instead of celebrating him, the Church arrests him. The Grand Inquisitor, an old cardinal, comes to Jesus’ prison cell that night. And he tells Jesus something chilling. He tells him that he made the wrong choices in the wilderness.

He essentially says, “You should have turned stones into bread.” The Grand Inquisitor goes on to say he should have done this because people are afraid of hunger and insecurity and they will gladly surrender their freedom to anyone who promises to feed them.

He says, “You should have thrown yourself from the temple.” Why? Because people don’t want to trust what they cannot see. They want certainty. They want spectacle. They want proof.

And finally, the Grand Inquisitor says: “You should have accepted power.” He argues that people do not want the burden of freedom. They want someone else to rule them. Someone else to make decisions for them. Someone else to tell them who they are and what to do. Someone else to keep them safe.

And then the Inquisitor says this devastating line: “We have corrected your work. We have given people bread. We have given people miracles. We have given people authority. And in exchange, they have given us their freedom. They have given us their conscience. They have given us their worship.”

What Dostoevsky reveals is that the temptations in the wilderness were never just about Jesus’ personal integrity and discipline – they were about what kind of kingdom he would build. The tempter offered Jesus a kingdom built on meeting immediate needs through control. The tempter offered Jesus a kingdom built on spectacle and domination. And Jesus

refused all of it, because he did not come to control or dominate humanity. He came to free humanity.

But freedom is harder – it requires trust, and love, and stewardship of God’s abundance. The Grand Inquisitor believes people cannot handle that kind of freedom. He believed that people would always choose the temptation: scarcity over abundance, spectacle over trust, power over love.

And if we are honest, I think we see how often this is true. We see it in systems that promise security if we just give them our loyalty. We see it in religious movements that promise certainty if we stop asking questions, or in political powers that promise protection if we surrender our compassion in favor of maintaining the status quo.

But the most powerful moment in the story is not what the Inquisitor says. It is what Jesus does. Throughout the whole story, Jesus says nothing. He does not argue. He does not defend himself. The story ends with Jesus walking up to the Inquisitor and he kisses him. It is a kiss of peace, a kiss of love, a kiss of forgiveness, because Jesus will never force himself on anyone. He will never control or dominate. He will only love. And that is the difference between empire and the kingdom of God. Empire feeds you so it can control you. God feeds you so you can live freely. Empire gives spectacle so you will submit. God gives presence so you can trust. Empire gives power so it can dominate. God gives love so you can become fully human.

I think about some of West Virginia’s own history in relationship to this story as life played out in the coal camps. Coal companies paid miners in scrip, currency that could only be used at the company store. The company provided bread. The company provided housing. The company provided everything. But as the company controlled the bread, they controlled the miners’ lives. They could work their whole lives and never be free, because the system that fed them also held them captive. The promise of provision became a tool of control.

And Jesus refuses that system in the wilderness. He refuses to build a kingdom on control. He refuses to build a kingdom on fear. He refuses to build a kingdom on scarcity. He chooses trust instead.

Today is the first Sunday of Lent, a wilderness season, where we seek to get our bearings and return to the heart of Christ. In this season we are called to return from living in fear of the myth of scarcity to a life of trust. We are called to return from spiritual spectacle or performative religion to relationship with God and one another. We are called to return from a drive for power to a life compelled by love. We are called to resist the temptation to bow down to false idols and worship the living and loving God.

Today, this passage of Scripture asks us: what or whom do we worship, because what we worship will shape everything.

At the end of the story, the tempter leaves, and angels come and tend to Jesus. God provides. God sustains. God is enough. And that is the good news – we do not need to live in fear! We do not need to bow to scarcity! We do not need to worship power!

We are free – to trust, to love, to give, to share together in God’s abundant provision, if only we would resist the temptation to hoard for ourselves. We are free to live as people who know that our lives are not sustained by bread alone, but by the God who has been sustaining us all along. And this Lent, we are invited to return, to set our compass on Christ and his kingdom, and to trust in God’s abundance. Amen.