

Full to the Brim: Loved in Our Wildernesses

Luke 4:1-13 (NRSVUE)

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WATCH/LISTEN: www.fbcjc.org/sermon/full-to-the-brim-loved-in-our-wildernesses/

I.

Praying or preaching in worship terrifies many. Singing a solo? Oh, no. I only sing in groups. But the most nerve-wracking thing? Leading the children's time. You never know what a child will say or do. One action, comment, or question from a young child, and even the most seasoned children's leader can be thrown off.

The arrival of Lent can catch us off guard, too. Ten weeks ago, we welcomed baby Jesus in Bethlehem. Now, we're preparing for his death.

That abrupt transition once led to an uncomfortable children's time in another church. A leader explained Lent to a group of kids, ending with Jesus' death. One little girl, eyes wide, cried, 'But he was just a baby!' She felt the weight of the story unfolding in real time. And in a way, she wasn't wrong.

Every year, we step into this story as participants. Lent refuses to let us sit comfortably in the joy of Advent for too long before it pulls us into the wilderness with Jesus, whether we're ready or not.

Maybe that's how it's supposed to be. Maybe Lent is meant to disrupt and throw us off a bit. After all, it mirrors Jesus' forty days in the wilderness—a time of hunger, testing, and clarity—a time to remember who we are and whose we are.

But what if the wilderness isn't just a test? What if it is a place of transformation?

II.

Jesus' transition into the wilderness was abrupt, too. The story reads like Jesus rose from the baptismal waters, his hair still damp from the waters of the Jordan River, and was led straight into the desert, his ears echoing God's voice which declared at his baptism, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." Before he preached a sermon or performed a miracle, he was declared beloved Son of God. That was his foundation, his identity.

Jesus doesn't go to the wilderness to become God's Son. He already is. The real test? How he will live out his identity as the Son of God. Will he remain faithful, above all, to God and God's kingdom over any other kingdom?

Presbyterian minister Frederick Buechner explains, "After being baptized, Jesus went off alone into the wilderness, where he spent 40 days asking himself what it meant to be Jesus."

Wilderness seasons in our lives take many forms, but you know you're in one when you reach for what once held you up, what once made you feel safe and certain —only to find it gone. Maybe your wilderness has looked like a hospital waiting room or doctor's office. Perhaps it has looked like

a kitchen table covered in unpaid bills, a pink slip, an eviction notice, or divorce papers. Maybe it has been the silence from God when you need an answer.

We avoid the wilderness, but maybe it's a place of transformation. A place where we remember who we are and whose we are. The Spirit led Jesus there, where he lived on nothing for forty days. What did that hunger-filled time do? It gave him clarity and resolve. It liberated him from anything that threatened his calling as God's beloved.

III.

Theologian Lori Brandt Hale tells a story about her three-year-old son, who encountered this passage in children's worship. That afternoon, he asked, "Mom, what do you know about the devil?" Don't you love those questions from children?

Lori hesitated, considering various theological perspectives on Satan. Then, she looked at her son and remembered he was three.

"What do you know about the devil?" A classic mom/professor/Jesus response. Answer a question with a question.

Her son replied, "The devil talked to Jesus. The devil was mean." Then, leaning in closer, he whispered, "If we were at a store, and you and Dad were in one aisle, and I was in another aisle, and there was candy ... the devil would say, 'You should take some!'"

Lori wanted to explain that Jesus' responses, not the temptations, were the story's focus. Each temptation in the wilderness invited Jesus to be less than who he was— to seek power over others rather than solidarity with them, to demand signs from God rather than trust God's faithfulness. Many would want him to free Israel through a powerful earthly kingdom, to be the kind of Savior *they* wanted him to be, but that would have meant turning away from God's plan. Jesus' answers to the tests showed his deep faithfulness to God, setting the course for his ministry and ultimate sacrifice.

But then, Lori "the Mom" took over again. Maybe her little boy already understood these points about the story. So, she asked him, "If we were in at the store, and Mommy and Daddy were in another aisle, and the devil told you that you should take some candy, what would you say back to the devil?"

His entire face lit up with a genuinely sweet grin, and he replied without hesitation, "Oh, I would say thank you!"ⁱ

IV.

Listening to her son retelling the story, Lori understood something essential: temptation isn't always obvious. It's often subtle.

The real danger for most of us isn't outright rejecting God but slowly forgetting what it means to be God's beloved. The wilderness doesn't test our strength; it reveals what we rely on.

Every time the devil offers Jesus more—more provision, power, protection—Jesus turns him down. He worships and serves God and God alone. He stays true to the values of the kingdom of God.

We assume tests come in dramatic moments. More often, they're quiet drifts—a shift in priorities, a slow compromise, a numbing of our hearts. We reach for things that don't satisfy. We numb when God calls us to feel. If we're honest, most of us rely on something to take the edge off life. Maybe not full anesthesia, but at least a pacifierⁱⁱ—scrolling, streaming, shopping, staying busy. We fill our time with noise when God invites us into silence. We chase fleeting things when God offers abundance. We pledge our allegiance to someone or something we trust more than God. We opt for authority, glory, power, and celebrity, even though it means doing what Jesus never did: making self-serving compromises with evil.

V.

Lent is forty days of intentionally stripping away these distractions and false securities. These small shifts aren't about impressing God but reclaiming our lives. It shines a spotlight on our false gods, inviting us to ask, "Who am I? Whose am I? What kingdom do I really belong to based on how I'm living?"

It teaches us what it means to stay faithful to our identity as God's beloved when the world whispers in our ear, "*You should take some candy.*"

- *You deserve this.*
- *Just numb the pain. Keep scrolling.*
- *Compromise a little, no one will know.*
- *If you don't put yourself first, there won't be enough.*
- *God's way is too slow, too soft, too empathetic. Take control.*
- *Winning is what matters. Do whatever it takes. The end justified the means.*

These whispers speak to our deepest fears and desires—security, power, validation—just as they did for Jesus. But like Him, we are called to respond with truth, trusting what satisfies comes not from what the world offers but from God and God alone.

A trip to the wilderness isn't about rejecting our regular lives but ensuring they are our real lives—the lives God created us for, the lives God calls us to live. In the wilderness, we discover that we don't have to hustle for what is already ours. We are God's beloved, full to the brim with God's love and presence. That truth holds firm when everything else falls away.

Shauna Niequist writes, "When I begin the day drenched in that love, that centering awareness of my worth and connection to God, the day is different. I don't have to scramble or hustle. Fear dissipates, and what I'm left with is warmth, creativity, generosity. I can make and connect and create and tell the truth, because my worth isn't on the line at every moment."

We are constantly told to scramble for control and hustle for worth and love. But in Christ, we already have all we need. The question is: Will we believe it? Will we live as if it's true?

That is our Lenten task: not to earn an identity but to live into the one we've already been given through Jesus Christ.

V.

I can't tell you what your wilderness test will be. Only you know the voices that lure you from who you are in Christ.

But I do know this: Our minds and the world tell us we can't survive without our comforts and controls. We aren't safe without our earthly securities and identities, and losing them will undo us. At first, losing them can feel unbearable. But if you breathe, pray, repeat the truth of God's word, and stay with it, something begins to shift.

You stop reaching for what's no longer there. You notice what you hadn't seen before. You feel awake, alive, free—more you than you've been in a long time. And maybe, just maybe, you remember who you were all along.

In Lent, we move with Jesus from the waters of baptism into the wilderness, from the silence of the tomb to the joy of resurrection. Along the way, we will be tempted to forget who we are, trade trust for control, and reach for earthly things that cannot sustain or save us. But if we stay the course and let the wilderness do its work, we might emerge a little clearer, a little freer, a little more *us* than before.

Even when we fail in the wilderness like the Israelites, God is still with us. The same Spirit who led Jesus into the wilderness leads us today and will never leave us lost. And maybe that's the point. Maybe Lent isn't about how well we navigate the wilderness but about remembering who walks with us. Perhaps it's about remembering what's already true: *We are God's beloved, full to the brim with God's love.*

So, when the world whispers, "*Take the candy. Prove your worth. Seize the power. Hustle for love. Serve yourself.*" May we have the courage to say, "No, thank you."

Because we already have all we need, and we know to Whose kingdom we belong—for the glory of God and the good of the world. Amen.

Melissa Hatfield © 2025

All scripture quoted is from the NRSVUE unless otherwise noted

ⁱ Feasting on the Word: Year C, Volume 2. Westminster John Knox Press. 2009

ⁱⁱ Thanks to Barbara Brown Taylor for this idea. https://day1.org/weekly-broadcast/5d9b820ef71918cdf2002924/the_wilderness_exam