
Being Led Into the Desert

A sermon by Canon Wallace Marsh
Lent 1 – Year C

Jesus was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, where for forty days he was tempted by the devil. Luke 4:1

You all have heard the joke, “Lead me not into temptation, because I can find the way myself.” Every Sunday we pray, “Lead us not into temptation,” because temptation is a part of the human condition. Since Jesus must experience the totality of humanity, the Spirit leads him into the desert to endure temptation.

And in the desert, Jesus experiences three temptations. At a first read, these temptations seem very different from the ones you and I experience on a daily basis. However, a closer look at the text will reveal that Jesus resists the very temptations that plague us each day.

The first temptation: “If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become bread” (Luke 4:3). In other words, will Jesus be tempted by his primitive instincts? Will he be tempted by the desire for security and survival?

In our culture of fear, we often make personal and political decisions based upon security and survival. And if you are like me, succumbing to this temptation has caused you to compromise your integrity, values, and maybe even your faith.

The second temptation: Satan says, “I will give you all of this kingdom if you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours” (Luke 4: 6-7). How many times have we exchanged true happiness for power? And on this Valentine’s Day, how many times have we exchanged someone’s love to acquire power?

There is a sense of invulnerability and immortality that come with power; we know this because we spend so much time trying to acquire it. How many memories and people have we sacrificed at the altar of power?

Finally, the third temptation: “If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down. Scripture has it, ‘He will bid his angels take care of you; with their hands they will support you, that you may not stumble upon a stone’” (Luke 4:9-11).

In other words, if Jesus jumps and performs this miracle he will achieve instant fame and public esteem. How many of us have jumped to things (or into the arms of someone) that offered us acceptance and affirmation? Please tell me that I am not the only BASE jumper in the room this morning because it is a temptation that we all have experienced.

So, the Spirit leads Jesus into the desert to experience these temptations, and in this season of Lent, we find ourselves in the same desert, acknowledging the ways these temptations have control over our lives.

In Godly Play, our children’s curriculum, a number of biblical stories take place in the desert. If you have seen us teach that curriculum, you know that each classroom has a large box with sand; we call it the desert box.

As you begin telling the story, you move the box into the center of the circle and tell the children the desert is a dangerous place, because there is no food or water. We tell them that people can die in the desert, and you should not enter it unless they have to go.

Today, the Spirit leads Jesus into the desert, and in this season of Lent, we are sent to the desert with Jesus. In the desert, we are forced to see that our lives are controlled by the very temptations Jesus renounces. In the desert we realize just how lost we have become and how much we are in need of God's help.

Episcopal priest Barbara Brown Taylor tells a great story about walking in the desert of South Georgia. Actually, she was walking along the beach late one morning and stumbled upon a sea turtle that was lost in the dunes.

The mother had laid her eggs, but disorientation had taken her inland, instead of back out to sea. Barbara found a park ranger and he came back with a jeep. The park ranger proceeded to flip the sea turtle on her massive shell, strap tire chains around her legs, and hook the chains to the back of his jeep.

Barbara said she watched horrified as the frightened turtle was drug over the dunes and through the sand. When the ranger got to the ocean, he unhooked the turtle and flipped her right side up. After a few waves washed over the turtle, she slowly began to swim back into the ocean.

After reflecting on the incident, Barbara Brown Taylor wrote, "It's sometimes hard to tell whether you are being killed or saved by the hands that turn your life upside down."^[1]

My prayer this Lent is that we realize we are in the desert, but we are not alone—Jesus is with us. In the desert, Jesus shows us that he is "the way, the truth, and the life," and there is a better way to live our lives (John 14:6).

This season of Lent is a period of self-examination, a season to intentionally listen to Jesus' voice, a season to strive to follow Jesus' example, and if need be, a season to allow the gospel to flip us upside down in order to save us.

The Psalmist writes, O God, you are my God...my soul thirsts for you, my flesh faints for you, as if I were in a desert where there is no water" (Psalm 63:1). We know this desert all too well.

The good news is there is water in our desert, but all we need to do is drink. Jesus said, "If anyone is thirsty let him come to me to drink" (John 7: 37).

^[1] Barbara Brown Taylor in *The Other Side Magazine* March & April 2000