

Genesis 2:15-17, 3:1-7

Matthew 4:1-11

Rev. Irene Pak Lee, preached at Stone Church of Willow Glen, February 26, 2023

Temptation and Invitation

Just a little over one year ago now, our church went through an abrupt transition with the sudden departure of our pastor and head of staff. It's hard to believe that it's already been a year or only been a year, depending on how you reflect on that time in the life of this congregation. I will always remember it for a myriad of reasons, but also because they left right before the Lent began. I found myself buckling up and gearing to lead us through the Lenten wilderness, which felt both figurative and literal.

And now, a year has gone by and here I stand with you again on this first Sunday in Lent. We began the season mid-week on Ash Wednesday, acknowledging our mortality, both remembering our baptisms and reminded that we shall return back to the earth. It's always such a privilege as one of your pastors to bless you with ashes and still see the soot stuck beneath my nails for days as a reminder of our finitude. Jan and Jerry brought Tab during the day for some "ashes to go" and I will tell you that there is nothing more real and humbling than blessing someone beloved to me and to this community who is a little over a century, at 101 years old with the words "remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return."

So in the holy spaces of this week and embarking on a well-planned out Lenten season with our fabulous interim, Evie, I found myself half panicked and staring at a blank computer screen trying to figure out what to say to you all today. I had read books, done some exegesis on the texts, all the things I usually do to prepare, and I was still coming up empty. Normally, this pastor nerd is excited about Lent and bringing us into the wilderness journey of it, but I could not find the right energy for it this week.

And then I was reminded and inspired by one of you. You should have started receiving the daily devotions written by members and friends of Stone and you probably remember when I was guilt tripping-I mean asking politely-for you all to submit something. He gave me his permission to share this, but I want to read to you an e-mail I got back from our dear friend Neale Barret on the day of the initial deadline I had set. He wrote,

"Hi Irene,

I failed you big time on this one. Sorry. Maybe a meditation on feeling like a blank sheet of paper, or the horror of a blank canvas, would be reflective of my state of

mind. But meditating would imply some presence and awareness, which I seem to be woefully lacking. Never mind that it probably wouldn't resonate with anyone. Anyway, I'm sorry. I tried. But no. #fail
Glad you're in my life,
Neale"

This is a perfect description of how I felt looking upon the blank pages of a message I was supposed to share with you all today. And then remembering some conversations I've had with several of you the past couple of weeks and the raw honesty of this *e-mail* gave me the words that I want to share with you today.

Because friends, I know it is not just me that is caught in the void, the desolation, and the aimlessness of the wilderness in another Lenten season. Maybe you are still in the midst of some kind of transition in your life, or in continued grief through loss of a loved one or loss of a relationship. Maybe you're in the wilderness of an unknown or uncertain diagnoses you have or have received, maybe mid-treatment or recovering from an emergency surgery. Maybe you're still navigating life after a global pandemic, or maybe the wilderness is as sudden as waking up one day and having new aches and pains you did not have before or finding yourself adjusting the page and not able to read that size 12 font as easily anymore. And so today, if you are here, feeling numb, lost, sad, mad, wandering or empty and not particularly spiritual, inspired, or revved up, I wonder if maybe like Jesus in the middle of this story, we are still mid-wilderness desert and not sure when we are getting out. Maybe some of us are not entering the wilderness, but instead, still in the middle of it.

Because you and I know that Jesus was in that wilderness desert for 40 days and 40 nights, and that does not seem too bad. But when he was going through it, he did not know how long he would be there. And I wonder, in the middle of it all, if he thought the wilderness would ever end. How many temptations and tests would be placed before him?

Growing up, I heard this story shared as Jesus kind of being like a Superman figure and easily overcoming each temptation. This understanding of Jesus made it hard for me to relate to him because he had the Son of God and divine advantage. To this day, many Christians struggle with humanizing Jesus. They'll say "fully human and fully God" but still give very little weight to the fully human part. But in a season where we are invited to delve deeper into our own motivations and response to easy solutions, easy answers, and offers of power that oppress, the fully human part of Jesus is what I want to know more about.

And so I wonder how long the pauses between the “temptation” and his responses were and how long it took him to figure it out. I wonder how long it took Jesus to understand that his belovedness by God did not transcend the other harder truth...the truth of ashes and dust and pain. I wonder how much of Jesus’ actual humanity came into play in the hard desert wilderness. Were there other tests that he did not pass and we just don’t know about them? I wonder.

What we do know though is that the devil offers Jesus three opportunities to walk away from God and from the foundational truth that he is God’s beloved. I wonder today how each of those same temptations might be an invitation and challenge for us as well as we begin another season of Lent, to trust God’s love even in the desert places of our lives. Even when we’re feeling like a blank canvas. I’ve been saying this a lot lately, but it really is one thing to trust God in retrospect, when the hard times are over, but trusting God in “real time” is a whole different story. Trusting God in the moment when nothing is certain or the way is unclear or we have no idea what in the world God is doing or when we have no idea when we will get to leave the wilderness... that’s a different story. And perhaps *that* is the invitation and challenge for us today.

Of course when it’s *our* turn, author Barbara Brown Taylor notes, “...none of us is going to get the Son of God test. We’re going to get the regular old Adam and Eve test, which means that the devil won’t need much more than an all-you-can-eat buffet and a tax refund to turn our heads.” Nevertheless, the desert wilderness can be a life-changing place where an individual’s or a congregation’s identity is clearly revealed. And so even in the desert, we are offered a choice-to trust God or to trust voices that lead us away from God. As we begin this 40 day journey, we have an opportunity to learn again or retune ourselves to discern God’s presence in a lonely wasteland. We have to also figure out and trust that we can be beloved and famished, valued and vulnerable at the same time. We are challenged to come through the desert remembering who we are and whose we are.

And so, if you’re walking through your own desert place right now, maybe it’s not about getting out of the desert as quickly as possible. Maybe we are being called to dwell in our doubts, our fears, our anxieties and brokenness. Maybe we are just supposed to cry it out. I know that’s probably not what you want to hear because that does not feel good, but you know as well as I do that escaping it only makes it come back in different ways anyways. In this season, can we see the wilderness not as something to run from, but as a classroom?

Bible commentator, Debie Thomas writes:

“We can be loved and hungry at the same time. We can hope and hurt at the same time. Most of all, we can trust that when God nourishes us, it won’t be by magic. It won’t be manipulative and disrespectful. It won’t necessarily be the food we’d choose for ourselves, but it will feed us, nevertheless... We want so much — *so much* — to believe that we can leverage our belovedness into an impenetrable shield. That we can get God to guarantee us swift and perfect rescues if we just believe hard enough. But no. If the cross teaches us anything, it teaches us that God’s precious children still bleed, still ache, still die. We are loved *in* our vulnerability. Not out of it.”

By the way, our friend Neale did not #fail to send me a devotion. You’ll see it pop up later in this season. You see, I wrote him back extending the deadline and encouraged him to share the truth of where he was in that moment. As I close, I want to share it with you.

He writes:

“Fear comes in many forms.
For some time now the form takes shape (if you will) as
The intimidation of the blank page, or maybe worse, a blank, white canvas,
Each laughing at desire I remember, but don’t feel.
Absence of desire, surely, and lacking the energy or will to create.
I am lost in a formless void; alive in a blank expanse.

In this season, when change begins, when creation longs for new life
I seek the desire, the energy, the will to create, but instead am lost in the flat
expanse Of the blank page, the terror of the formless canvas, the idea looked for but
unrealized.

In this searching, I am like Odysseus, seeking that which is lost. Remembering what
used to seem so real, and hoping still is – that

In absence is Presence.
In wilderness, Home.

In mystery, Revelation.
In silence, the Voice.”

Friends, today, let’s keep walking through the wilderness. The struggle is long, but there are also angels in the desert. We can and we will walk through it together, and on the other side, the promise of resurrection awaits us. May we believe that this day, if even for a moment. Amen.