

Matthew 4: 1-11

Preached at Stone Church of Willow Glen by Rev. Fred Harrell

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O Lord Throughout These 40 Days

So, Jesus going in to the wilderness. I know I've talked with many of you who regularly hike or who have done pilgrimages yourself. I know that's had a big impact on this congregation. It's had a big impact on me as well.

I had the opportunity back in 2018 to go to the Fells of England and the Lake District in the northern part of the country with a poet by the name of David White. For those of you who want to go look up his poetry later, the beauty of the trip is, "We're going to go just be in this beautiful pastoral setting and listen to David White's wisdom."

Except David is going to work you hard. He is going to make you walk, and it's going to be long, and a lot of people didn't like it. Actually, it was a little irritating the first few days because people didn't realize they'd signed up for something quite as strenuous as that.

Now there was a heat wave also going through northern England at the time. And so what he did wisely was change all of the hikes till 5:30 or 6 o'clock in the evening when the sun was starting to come down, because it never totally goes down that time of year. And so we would do is they'd have these five- and six-hour hikes, and by the time you get to 11:30 or 12 o'clock at night, you can see, but you really can't see. Like I ran into a sheep one time.

The thing is, I have to say, I don't have a lot of God moments, like God spoke to me. Anytime somebody says that to you, be careful. But I do believe I had, if you want to call it a peak experience or a divine moment, but there was something about my body breaking down in the deprivation. But it wasn't just like depriving myself in some kind of esthetic way of like, you know, going overboard, but just a simplicity, one foot in front of the other.

There's like 30 of us. But you know, you, it's like this. You know, sometimes you're by yourself for an hour or two, and then you're back together. But in the silence of that one evening, in particular, I felt the presence of God. And then the words that came to me were the words of my children — one of whom I've worried about quite a bit — saying, "I'm going to be all right. I'm going to be okay, Dad. "It's going to be fine." I was just bawling in the middle of the mountains. But it's partly because it was a wilderness experience.

There's something about it that makes space, the simplicity, the deprivation, the noise is gone, the silence and it gives room for God to do something new.

Jesus had just been baptized. His hair was still wet from the Jordan, and the voice from heaven — “This is my Son, the Beloved” — was still ringing in his ears when the Spirit led him into the wilderness. It turns out, being the beloved in whom God is well pleased does not exempt Jesus from feeling hunger. From feeling sickness, from feeling pain. It did not exempt him from that.

Think of Jesus in solitude. Have you ever been somewhere completely alone? On a deserted beach, in the mountains, or deep in a quiet space? That's where Jesus was, exposed and vulnerable. Day after day, he prayed. The Tempter watched and waited. And then, after 40 days — famished and weak — the testing began.

Hebrews 4 reminds us that Jesus was tempted in every way as we are, yet without sin. He understands our weaknesses. The test comes in despair, when we are most desperate.

How are you famished today? Many of us hunger for connection, for hope, for stability. When we are depleted, we are most susceptible to temptation but also most open to God's transformation. These moments are when we are most tempted to swim in the most dangerous water there is, the sea of self-pity. It is in that sea often where anything is possible. And in those moments there has to be a way that we're cleaning out our ears, waking up as best we can and trying to do exactly what I believe Jesus did in the temptation wilderness: remember our baptismal identity. We are God's beloved child.

I remember my therapist saying to me in a particularly anxious season of my life: “Whenever you begin to feel that way, Fred, I want you to go look in the mirror and tell that little boy it's going to be all right.”

So how is despair happening in your life? Will you allow yourself to feel it, and not rush to relieve it?

To ask what it might have to teach you. That's a good Lenten question to ask.

What am I doing in the midst of my famine?

The devil begins, “If you are the Son of God...” Hear the snark in that: *Really? You're God's Son? Prove it.*

Temptation is always about power — how we use it, how we misuse it, how we justify it.

First temptation: *Turn these stones into bread.* Practice a little magic to feed yourself. The temptation to use power for self-comfort. It's the temptation of privilege, the urge to secure comfort for ourselves first, even when others are hungry. The Tempter says: "I know how to use your power. Use it to get as comfortable as possible."

Second temptation: *Throw yourself down, and God will catch you.* The temptation to test God, to demand proof. The Tempter even quotes Scripture here, because holy words can be twisted for selfish gain. This is the temptation to use faith as spectacle, as certainty, as a means of proving superiority.

Third temptation: *Bow to me, and I will give you all the kingdoms of the world.* The temptation to dominate, expand, and control. This is the root of colonization, white supremacy, and oppressive systems. It whispers: *You deserve more. Take what you can.*

But Jesus knows that a life of endless expansion is a road to losing one's soul, not to mention ruining the planet.

At the heart of all temptation is the lie: *You deserve better than this. God is holding out on you.* It's a call to chase affirmation from another source. Temptation is, at its core, an attempt to exempt ourselves from being human.

And yet, Jesus insists on being human. He does not turn stones to bread. He does not demand miraculous rescue. He does not seize power. Instead, he chooses to be Emmanuel — *God with us* — who chooses to not exempt himself from the pain of what it means to be human. And is able to sympathize with our weaknesses.

Jesus clings to his baptismal identity: Beloved of God. No temptation could make him more beloved.

An old theologian once said, "*Faith is the refusal to panic.*" Think about that. Fear-driven decisions are rarely wise. Psalm 37 says, "*Do not fret — it leads only to evil.*"

Fret comes from the Old English word *freton*, which means to devour like an animal. When you fret over something, it consumes your thoughts. To get in that place of anxiety, of fretting, of panicking is almost always a place we make some of our very worst decisions and it's in that moment we have to again push pause.

I am God's beloved child. I am going to operate out of that, and if that's the case, I actually don't have to panic. I actually have nothing to prove. Again and again, God comes to me. Comes to us.

The voice of the Tempter always plays to our fears. It tells us we must prove our worth, prove our belonging, prove we are enough. But when we rest in God's love, we realize: *We have nothing to prove.*

When we know we are loved by God, we don't have to prove anything to anyone. There is nothing we can do to make ourselves more beloved than we are.

So how is this sermon landing with you right now, I wonder? Maybe someone right now is saying, "Really? Jesus knows what it's like to be tempted in every way, really?"

Does Jesus really know what it's like to try to have a career in this economy? Does Jesus know what it's like being lonely? And I don't really see any end in sight to that? Does Jesus really know what it's like to go through a divorce and to feel the pain of that?

Does Jesus know what it's like to parent teenagers? Does Jesus know what it's like to be a teenager in 2025? Does Jesus know what living with chronic pain is like? Does Jesus know what it's like to suffer from a debilitating depression? Does Jesus know what it's like to be caught in a spiral of substance abuse? Of getting clean and then relapsing?

I don't think Jesus has experienced every one of those things.

But Jesus knows what it is to be human. He knows hunger, loneliness, suffering, rejection. He knows what it is to cry out to God and hear only silence. So, he meets us with empathy. He doesn't save us from the human experience, he suffers it with us. At his baptism, Jesus heard the truth about who he was. But in the wilderness, he had to face every attack on that truth. When the memory of God's voice faded, he had to learn what it really meant to be beloved.

Maybe we, like Jesus, need the wilderness to learn that we can be beloved and uncomfortable, beloved and unsafe, beloved and uncertain. This is the Lenten journey: Learning again to trust the love that remains even in our wilderness experiences.

Jesus will pass a harder test in Gethsemane. He will take his final exam on the cross. And he will choose, again, not to exempt himself from the full weight of humanity. And in doing so, he will redeem the world.

Lent is an invitation: to remember who we are, to trust in God's love, and to resist the voices that would tell us otherwise. May we enter this season with open hearts. Amen.