

SERMON: "INTO THE WILDERNESS"

TEXT: OLD TESTAMENT PSALM 32
NEW TESTAMENT MATTHEW 4:1-11

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First Sunday in Lent

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INTRODUCTION

I have learned so much (and am still learning so much) from so many people
Let me tell you a few things I learned from Margaret. She made this stole.
I'll tell you about the stole a little later. I think it teaches a valuable lesson.
But the first lesson learned I want to tell you about is one about adventure
Looking at life, the journey of life with all its twists and turns, as an adventure

Margaret and her kids would go on mini – vacations (3 or 4 days)
She would throw a pencil in the air, let it land. Then they'd take a quick look
at a map and start driving in that direction ... and just explore
I like that. Haven't tried it yet. Sounds like a great idea for retirement
I have a good friend who has named that as part of his retirement plan.

I love that sense of adventure, of seeing life not just as journey but as an adventure
And I am admittedly OCD, a bit of a planner. I think you can be a planner
and an explorer / adventurer at the same time. It is about the attitude
Stepping into the unknown (or knowing enough to be a bit scared)
And stepping into it thinking you might learn something, trusting it will be alright

As we enter the holy season of Lent, we begin with a kind of adventure
This is how Lent begins ... with the story of Jesus' temptation.

Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tested by the devil. He fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterward he was famished. The tempter came and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread." But Jesus answered, "It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.'"

That is how the story is introduced. Jesus being led into temptation, led by the Spirit
'into the wilderness.' He doesn't stumble into the wilderness. He goes there on
purpose. Adventure awaits out there. Notice the picture on the screen.
That is the Judean wilderness. It is the wilderness as in 'out of the way'
or even 'in the way'. That is the way the Spirit wants Jesus, wants us, to go

That's what I want to explore with you this morning ... into the wilderness.
I do so with the unknown of just throwing a pencil in the air because I want to
encourage you to embrace the unknown, the adventure of following Jesus.
How about we follow him wherever he might be going?
How about we follow him into the wilderness?

NOT SO SIMPLE

Stepping into the wilderness, beginning the adventure which is the holy season of Lent, I probably ought to apologize for some previous sermons on the story of Jesus' temptation. You see all too often we read this story and jump right into the three temptations mentioned here. It just lends itself to a three-point sermon, doesn't it? Add a poem and call it a day.

I apologize for those sermons ... like temptation fits into and is contained by some three point outline. Keep these three boxes closed and you'll be good.

I also need to apologize for any sermons where I've focused too much about these temptations being right at the beginning of Jesus' ministry. It's the first thing on the "to do" list. That is true. It is important to note that temptation can't just be skipped, Can't just take the Grundy Center by-pass

But just because it is first doesn't mean that we deal with temptation early on. And then we are all good. Really need to apologize for sermons that sound like 'oh, I was such a wild child, such a bad boy ... but now look at me after I turned my life over to Jesus. I'm so good, got it all together now, model of success. I'll have to market (I mean preach) that. That will sell!"

Like I did all my sinning back on a college campus in Georgia!
Temptation is just as real today as it was yesterday, just as real in the quiet of a desert wilderness as it is in the hustle and bustle of the city.

Please, if you're somehow still holding on to it, let go of the falsehood that cities are more sinful, more dangerous than small towns and rural areas. Crime and corruption and poverty are rural problems too ... statistically worse in many parts of the country. Check out the book The Injustice of Place by Edin, Shaefer and Nelson. Great book on the legacy of poverty.

Temptation isn't something we get over or get around or avoid by getting away. We just have to get through. Jesus did that ... and not just three times. And not just in the desert wilderness of Judea. He did so throughout his life in ministry with religious leaders regularly challenging him, testing him, and with followers who all too often just didn't get it.

I pray you noticed the common threads in the story of Jesus' temptation. The temptations are very much about power and how it is used. Turn this stone into bread. Feed yourself (maybe make more and feed others). Show off your power with a test, a spectacle. Take more power for yourself.

And the same kind of temptations about how to use his power throughout his ministry. "Do here in your hometown what we heard you did over there."
"What is he doing eating with those sinners?"
"Come down off that cross and prove yourself to be the Son of God."

BOUNCING OFF BUMPS

Like Jesus we are tempted to use our power for ourselves,
use it to make a point, use it to get more power.

Ok, let me pause there and tackle a temptation right here and now
When I talk about using power to get more power, I'll admit my bias
We all have biases. Please don't go acting like you're the objective one

When I start thinking about power and how it is used,
Especially when it is used to gain more power (like the tempter offered)
my mind goes not just to politics and the people in power
It usually goes to something I am against, something that I think is wrong
It goes all too quickly to their sin, to what someone else needs to stop doing

I stop there to admit that because maybe your mind does the same thing
So how about we be honest about that? Then try our best to stop there
and instead of focusing on how someone else misused their power
think about my own power and how I have used it, what I can do better

Oh, and please don't try and convince your pastor that you don't have any power
I'm not buying that. Your words and actions can and do make a difference
You may not get your name in the headlines or a history book
But you can change the world for the good. You can

Change for the good is led by ordinary folks joining their voices together
So please don't buy into the temptation of thinking sin is something
that someone else does AND/OR that you're just a pawn on the board.
You have power that can be misused, twisted by a tempter.
You have power that can be used to do some real good in the real world

You know we enter into this holy season of lent, of reflection, of humility
on purpose ... just like Jesus was led 'into the wilderness.'
We do so trusting that that same Spirit will lead us through
whatever wilderness there may be around us or ahead of us

Our Old Testament lesson today is a song of someone who has been led through
It is a humble and hopeful and thankful song. That is our journey ... through.

Have you been watching the Olympics? Beth likes the skating
Me, I like the skiing. I especially like watching them ski the moguls
I told Beth as we started to watch them, "Watch their upper bodies.
They will be still. But their legs will be bouncing like crazy
That's how the really good skiers ski the bumps

Show picture of me skiing "Amen"

SUMMARY

Yes, that is a picture of me some thirty years ago. At the top of a run called "Amen"
I had to ski that. Should have also taken a picture at the bottom of the run
You would have noticed some snow on me. I fell a few times. My upper body
was not so still. It switched positions with my lower body a few times.

The smooth skiers ski through the bumps. They find the grooves. Beautiful to watch
Me, not so much. I bounce off the bumps, fly off one onto another
It is a bumpy ride. It's about as smooth as a gravel road ... with potholes
But back to that lesson about adventure. I'd do it again.
"Amen" wasn't my last fall of the day or my last run

That brings me back to another lesson learned from Margaret
The first was about adventure in general. This one is about adventure with
some specifics. No reason pretending adventure, following Jesus, is easy ...
or meant to be easy. There will be bumps ... and falls ...
and temptations ... and power misused

Understanding that truth, let me explain the stole Margaret made
It started with an ugly tie contest we had at church. We took the ugly ties and used
them to put feathers on the drawing of a turkey. It was around Thanksgiving.
Margaret being very crafty, took the ties and made them into a stole
Then she made another and another for both preachers and for our interns

This is the one she made for me to wear during Lent, all in shades of purple
The message behind the stoles she makes ... God takes what we might
think of as ugly or useless and makes it into something useful and beautiful

Take a good look at the stole up close. Some pretty ugly ties
But back up and see it all together. Somehow it all fits, all works together

That is what happens in ... and through ... the wilderness
Because God leads us through the wilderness in its many and varied forms,
God holds us, holds on to us, hold us up and hold us together.
That is the common thread throughout the stole
and throughout our adventure stories that are our lives.