

March 9<sup>th</sup>, 2025

## Luke 4:1-13 “God Moves in the Desert”

This is the first Sunday of Lenten Season, and our theme this year is “God on the Move.” Traditionally, Lenten season kicks off with Jesus’ 40-day trip to the Judean wilderness where he was tempted by the devil. We mentioned this in passing a few weeks ago, but now it’s time to dig in and see what we can learn from his forty days in the wilderness.

I recently got back from a four-day journey to the wilderness in Death Valley. I did *not* go with the intention of being tempted by the devil. That happens to me daily, so I figured four days would suffice. Originally, I was going to take the second half of last week off to have a minor surgical procedure I’ve needed for a while. Back when I first made the appointment, I asked Georgeanne if she could preach for me, because the procedure had the potential to affect my voice for a few days. Well, last month my doctor said he had a cancelation and could squeeze me in earlier, so I said, “Let’s do it.” Everything went fine. I was in and out in no time with no impact on my vocal chords. But a couple of weeks ago, I did have a little scare when I went to the gym for my exercise class. When I went to log the day’s workout on my watch, I noticed that my heart rate was at 100 BPM before I even started the warmup. So I scrolled to my hourly chart and discovered that I was running at close to 100 BPM all day which explained why I was feeling kind of ramped up and anxious. A nurse and a hematologist in my class did a

few field-tests on me and determined that I wasn't having any kind of major cardiac event. Then the hematologist asked me, "Have you felt stressed or anxious lately?" I said, "Dude, have you watched the news lately?" He said, "You need to find some time to chill out and relax." So I looked at my calendar for the last week of February and discovered that it was relatively free because that was the week I planned to take off for my procedure. I still had the pulpit covered for that Sunday, so I thought, "Well, the first Sunday of Lent is about Jesus in the wilderness, so I think I'll go to one of my favorite wilderness places, and spend some time preparing for Lent!"

I have an interesting relationship with Death Valley. If you just look at it on the map or drive through it casually, you think, "Wow, there is a whole lot of *nothing* here." But when you take the time to explore the nooks and crannies of the park, you learn to appreciate the stark beauty of the wide-open spaces. While I was there, I had some great inward *and* outward observations. When I go to Death Valley, it seems eerily *silent* and that silence is difficult, because I feel like most of the time, I'm at the mercy of what's going on in my brain, and sometimes what's going on in my brain is scary. The silence forces me to confront those thoughts and give them to God so I can discover the path I need to take. When I visit Death Valley, I try to put myself in Jesus' shoes and wonder what it must have been like for him to wander in the wilderness. What was it like for him to experience that level of silence? What was he thinking? I feel like he already

understood his calling and purpose, but I'm not sure if he had a game plan yet. I also wonder how the devil appeared to him. Luke's gospel says Jesus was tempted by the "diabolus," which can mean, "devil of slanderer or back-biter." It's where we get the word "diabolical." When we hear the word "devil" in this day and age, we think of a red guy with horns and a pitchfork. But that's an image that originated in medieval European art. I also think of that old Flip Wilson comedy sketch, "The devil made me do it." The "diablos" – this devil-slanderer in Luke's gospel is never described. I've never "seen" a devil before, but I know what it's like to be on the receiving end of the kind of slander and self-blame that comes from inside. So let's take a look at what kind of "back-biting" accusations and temptations Jesus faced during his wilderness journey and see if we can recognize how they creep into our lives too.

**Temptation #1** – The devil said, "If you are who you say you are, command these stones to turn to bread." The devil was saying, "C'mon, Jesus, you're hungry and you've got the power to spare -- just use that power to turn stone to bread. Use it to serve yourself." For us, I see this as a temptation to trust only in our own resources and adopt an attitude of scarcity even though we are called to live in an attitude of abundance. The temptation, as it appears in this story, seems like a no-brainer to resist. But we humans always complicate things. We dig in our heels and refuse to have an attitude of abundance. We succumb to greed in order to manage our insecurities. We say, "I know we're supposed

to trust God, and for the most part, it's worked out for me, but this time it's different! This time God's not going to provide. In fact, things seem hopeless so I should get an exemption card for this 'live abundantly' mandate. I *have* to horde and run over people to get what's 'mine' because if I don't, someone else is going to get it." And yet Jesus says, "One does not live by bread alone." Trust in God's providence. I know, easier said than done, but that's what we're called to do

**Temptation #2** – This is a tricky one because it's rooted in our desire for power. Sometimes we Christians lie to ourselves and say, "Well, God *wants* us to have power and control! It's our right – our destiny - to have it!" There are Christians who go out of their way to grasp for power. One school of thought is known as the "Seven Mountains Mandate." Go ahead and look that one up. Here's the official definition – "It holds that there are seven aspects of society that believers seek to dominate: family, religion, education, media, arts and entertainment, business, and government." And you may think, "Well, shoot. That doesn't sound like a bad idea at all. Sounds like a good *project* to start ... well ... this year!" Wouldn't it be nice for Christians to have control over those things for a change? It seems like we don't have much of a say in anything these days. In fact, it feels like we get trampled and ridiculed any time we speak up. If we can gain enough power and influence – if we can manage to climb to a higher place on the figurative social ladder, we can get to an advantageous position to conquer those seven

mountains and life will be better or at least more comfortable for us! Then we can show people who's boss, and they won't make fun of us and try to persecute us! Satan won't be in control of all these mountains anymore and then *we* can make the rules. Mwah-hah-hah-hah-hah!" Good grief pastor, you sure have a knack for exaggeration. You make Christians who just want to exercise a little influence in the world sound like super villains. Mwah-hah-hah. Good grief. That's silly. They just want to be in the spotlight for a change. It would be nice to have a captive audience to witness for Jesus. We're never going to have any sort of influence if we're just sitting around hoping that things are going to happen by making little incremental changes. We've got to go out there and get what's ours! I mean, look at this world - it seems like the devil is in charge of everything. *We* need to be in charge!

And yet, when we read this scripture, we learn that the devil took Jesus to a high place to see all the kingdoms of the world and showed him the rewards and advantages of those who are in power. And he said, "To you I will give all this authority and their glory; for it has been delivered to me, and I give it to whom I will. If you, then, will worship me, it shall all be yours." Pastor, we aren't going to 'worship' anyone to get this power! We're going to go out there and take it in Jesus' name. How is *that* 'worship?' Jesus responded to the devil and said, "It is written, 'You shall worship the Lord your God, and him only shall you serve.'" It is God only that we shall serve. Anything else is idolatry. Anything that we

give our attention to more than God is idolatry. We talked about this not long ago. Idols don't have to be "things" or "statues." Idols are *anything* that we put ahead of God and God's agenda. Idolatry is anything that knocks us out of alignment with God. Idolatry can be the desire to have power over everything. But the Law and the Prophets and Jesus himself tells us that God and God alone is our highest priority. We human beings are not meant to sit on the throne. It's God and God alone. "Yeah, but if we don't do something, *they* (whoever 'they' are), are going to persecute us!" And yet a few weeks ago when we were learning about the beatitudes, we heard Jesus say, "blessed are you when 'they' revile and persecute you, for your reward will be great in heaven." The kingdom of God is not going to be established by grabbing for power or bullying people who aren't like us. Jesus says that the kingdom of God is going to spread subversively – like yeast in dough – like a mustard seed in a field. To grab for power, as much as it seems like a noble idea, is idolatry and again it shows a lack of faith and trust in God.

**Temptation #3** – The devil takes Jesus up on the pinnacle of the temple, the center of religious life for God's people, and says – "Jump off, and call some angels to help you." This isn't about angels so much as it's about where the devil took Jesus. He took Jesus to the temple that King Herod built -- as in Herod who wanted to kill baby Jesus. This was a temple that wasn't built to improve or enhance the Jewish religious experience. It was built to show off the power and perks that

came from cozying up to Rome. We'll see more about this subject when Jesus gets angry about money changers in the temple. Anyway, the point is temples are temporary. In fact, in the big picture, they aren't even necessary. Only a few decades after Jesus' time on earth, the Romans reduced Herod's "look at me" temple to rubble. It's the same lesson that the Babylonian exiles had to learn -- the true temple, the one that matters, is *here*.

Consider this – in every temptation that the devil threw at Jesus, he quoted scripture out of context to convince Jesus to fall into the temptation. “Well, you know Jesus, the scripture says!” And yet, Jesus quotes scripture right back at the devil in the context it was written, and says, “No. God is sufficient for me.” The temptations we face from day to day may not be as dramatic as the ones in our scripture this week, but in a way, we face versions of Jesus' temptations every day. And in the hustle and bustle and stress of what's going on around us, when our hearts are racing and our anxiety is amped up, we tend to go for whatever is easiest for us. But when we take time to seek sanctuary and experience the quiet of the wilderness, we are in a much better position to resist these temptations. But where is our wilderness? Where is *our* place away from hustle and bustle of the world where we can go just to meditate and pray about what we're called to do and not just do what we think is the easiest? (gesture to the sanctuary) There's a reason we call this a space sanctuary. But remember – Jesus didn't stay in the sanctuary of the wilderness. He returned to the “real world.” We must return

as well. This experience in the Judean wilderness is what launched Jesus' public ministry. This was the beginning of his road to the cross. On our road we will face some challenges too. We may have to learn about some uncomfortable truths that we'd rather not deal with. But at least we'll have a safe space to prepare. A place where we can agree to differ, resolve to love and unite to serve. Where we can say, "in essentials unity, in non-essentials liberty, and in all things charity." Where we can discover our ministerial call. Will it be prophetic? Will it be nurturing and healing? Will it be educating and equipping? What will we do "out there?" Right here, we can come as we are – whether we're tired or angry or afraid or apathetic. Shoot, we'll let you in if you're feeling joyful, encouraged, and confident too. But come as *you* are because God meets us where *we* are.