

To the Wilderness

Lenten Journey: Part 1 “To the Wilderness”

Rev. Cameron D St. Michael – February 26, 2023

1st Sunday in Lent

Readings: Matthew 3:13-4:17

Reflection: Psalm 32

Greeting: Come, let us go to the house of our God. So that he may teach us his ways. And may we walk in God’s paths. Come, let us walk by the light of the Lord! (*Isaiah 2:3-5*)

Prayer: Lord, we ask for your guidance in these forty days. May you help us to prepare our hearts and lives to be transformed by your steadfast love. Be gracious to all who have strayed from your ways like lost sheep, and return us to the fold of your mercy. Help us as we journey with our Savior to know your truth and grace. May we be moved by your Spirit that we may join together to humbly worship you. We pray that you will strengthen us by faith that we may walk in your light and may share your good news with joyful and glad hearts as we celebrate our deliverance from slavery to sin and death through the sacrifice of your Son our Savior. And it is in Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.

Reflection: Psalm 32

Happy are those whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered. Happy are those to whom the Lord imputes no iniquity and in whose spirit there is no deceit. While I kept silent, my body wasted away through my groaning all day long. For day and night your hand was heavy upon me; my strength was dried up as by the heat of summer. Then I acknowledged my sin to you, and I did not hide my iniquity; I said, “I will confess my transgressions to the Lord,” and you forgave the guilt of my sin. Therefore let all who are faithful offer prayer to you; at a time of distress, the rush of mighty waters shall not reach them. You are a hiding place for me; you preserve me from trouble; you surround me with glad cries of deliverance. I will instruct you and teach you the way you should go; I will counsel you with my eye upon you. Do not be like a horse or a mule, without understanding, whose temper must be curbed with bit and bridle, else it will not stay near you. Many are the torments of the wicked, but steadfast love surrounds those who trust in the Lord. Be glad in the Lord and rejoice, O righteous, and shout for joy, all you upright in heart. (Psalm 32 NRSV)*

We read the words of the 32nd Psalm and we hear about God’s forgiveness. That we confess our sins before the Lord and find forgiveness in his steadfast love. That God hears our prayers and strengthens us by faith. Do you turn to God in prayer constantly? Do you seek forgiveness for your own transgressions? Do you pray for the strength to forgive others? Do you seek the

guidance of the Holy Spirit in your everyday life? How has your heart and life been changed because of Christ? How can you share Christ with others in this season of preparation?

Prayer: O God, help us to remember your great compassion for your people as shown to us through Jesus Christ our Lord. May you help us to prepare to have our hearts and lives be changed through your mercy and grace. May your steadfast love inspire and strengthen us in these forty days. It is with penitent and grateful hearts that we come before to share our joys and our concerns on this day. We ask that you lift us up in both our laughter and our tears so that we may know your compassion. May you bless us in both our celebrations and our sorrows so that we may know that you are always with us, and may we always be thankful for your faithfulness as shown through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

Now let the words of our mouths, and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

Sermon:

Our scripture reading for today comes from the New Revised Standard Version Bible. Our reading for today comes from Matthew chapter 3 verse 13 through chapter 4 verse 17.

Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan, to be baptized by him. John would have prevented him, saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" But Jesus answered him, "Let it be so now, for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness." Then he consented. And when Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw God's Spirit descending like a dove and alighting on him. And a voice from the heavens said, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased." 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 he answered, "It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.'

This is the word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God.

Today So today marks the beginning of our Lenten series and we will be going on a Lenten journey. We will be traveling with Christ to various destinations. Our first destination helps us to understand why we have these forty days. We travel with Christ as we go to the wilderness. Now, I included a few more verses than we usually use for these readings, because I wanted to put this event in context for us. Because too often this event is taken by itself and we don't have any frame of reference when we try to think about when Jesus is in the wilderness. It just happens. I also wanted to make a connection to our previous series, because we start with a phrase that we also heard in the Transfiguration. We begin with Jesus going to the Jordan to be baptized by John the Baptist. When Jesus rises from the water the Spirit rests on him and we hear the familiar words "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased." We see that connection to the Transfiguration when we saw God's glory revealed in Christ. Now, we step back to the beginning to see the start of Christ's public ministry. Before Jesus begins his public ministry, he is baptized. After this, he is led by the Spirit into the wilderness. It is there that Jesus faces temptation.

Jesus is in the wilderness for forty days, and after that we get a rather interesting back and forth with Satan offering temptations to Jesus. These tests often remind me of Job, because the temptations can be seen as tests of understanding Scripture. The first of these temptations is "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread." Basically, if you have the power, use it for personal gain. Don't just sit there hungry. But Jesus replies with a quotation from Deuteronomy chapter 8 and it is the latter half of verse 3, which reads "one does not live by bread alone but by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord." Jesus is directly quoting from Scripture as a response. So, in a way, the next temptation is very fitting. Jesus is taken to the holy city, up to the pinnacle of the temple, and from up on that high place he receives his next challenge, his next temptation. "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down," but now we have something a little different. We get a quotation from Satan. "for it is written, 'He will command his angels concerning you,' and 'On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.'" This is a quotation of Psalm 91. If we read verses 11 and 12, they read "For he will command his angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways. On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone." This is something important to fully comprehend. Because Jesus once again replies by quoting Deuteronomy, this time from chapter 6 and the first half of verse 16. "Do not put the Lord your God to the test."

What I find interesting about this is that both Satan and Jesus are quoting Scripture in this exchange in the wilderness. You may have noticed that I don't often quote particular verses of Scripture and cite them. Part of this is because I often don't like to pull individual lines out of their contexts. A big part of the reason is this exchange right here. Because something that we have to understand about the Bible is that if we try to take individual lines and rip them out of their context and quote them, we can miss the bigger picture. I think it's important for us

to recognize that because it can be very tempting just to quote an individual line and say “the Bible says this.” But we are then pressed to ask the question “is that really what it says?” This is something that I wanted to address as we begin our Lenten journey, a journey to prepare ourselves. Lent becomes a time where we prepare ourselves for Easter. That we remember Christ’s death and resurrection, and what they mean for us, and how they call us to live. That we work on getting our hearts, minds, and souls in the right place. That we think about what God’s love and mercy truly mean for us as followers of Christ. And that really is why I wanted to pause on this interaction. Because Satan quotes scripture very directly. It isn’t misquoting Scripture; it is quoting it directly. Then Jesus quotes Scripture right back. Satan says angels will protect you from even bumping your foot against a rock, while Jesus contends that you shouldn’t test God. Both of these verses come from a larger context surrounding them. So we are forced to see if they speak to the larger context of understanding God better. Jesus is making the point that we cannot demand a miracle, because that is not trusting God. If we look at the second half of the verse he quoted, it mentions Massah. That is where the Israelites argued with Moses about finding water, the place where Moses asked why they wanted to test the Lord. You can read Exodus 17 for that reference. But when we have the context, we can see the bigger point Jesus is making. Testing God isn’t a sign of faith but a sign of doubt.

But it also means that we could read Scripture wrong if we’re not paying attention. Because we also have to think about the motivation for quoting Scripture. Is the motivation to honor God? Is the motivation to highlight what is right, what is good, what is just? What this interaction says to me is that we have to be thinking about that when we decide to quote Scripture. Why are we quoting it? And are we quoting it in a way that honors the overarching message? Or are we just pulling out verses that sound good? Now I’ve got a great example of this that actually comes from the third interaction in our reading today. The final challenge in Matthew is that Satan shows Christ all the kingdoms of the world, and offers them to him if Jesus will just fall down and worship him. That is verse 9 there in Matthew 4. Here is a great example of why context matters. Do we want to be out there, lost in the wilderness not understanding the Scripture we are quoting? Do we want to fall into the trap of quoting Scripture in a way that doesn’t honor the message, the way we see Satan challenging Christ? I say this because I once saw a calendar of inspirational Bible verses, and it quoted Luke instead of Matthew. But it said “If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours.” The calendar didn’t take into account who was speaking. That changes the entire meaning, when you realize that it is a quotation of Satan tempting Christ. Context changes what the words mean. Jesus replies by rebuking Satan saying “Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.” Jesus is quoting Deuteronomy, and this time it looks like a combination of chapter 6 verse 13 and chapter 10 verse 20. At this point, Satan departs, and Jesus is finally left in peace.

After this is when Jesus begins his public ministry. Our final few verses for today show Jesus leaving Nazareth and making his home in Capernaum. He then goes out to share the message “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” I extended our reading to this

point to give us the final context for the journey to the wilderness. That journey doesn't happen in the middle of Christ's public ministry. It isn't in the middle of everything, but happens before he goes out and begins calling the disciples to him. Jesus is driven out into the wilderness to prepare for that ministry. It's this test that helps to strengthen him, being tested to know that he was ready. That's what reminded me of Job about this, as a test of faith. It also reminds me of Moses' own forty days on the mountain with God. It is a time of preparation, to ready heart and mind to be in the right place. I think that is the challenge for us as we begin to prepare our hearts and minds, to prepare our souls for the resurrection. That we allow ourselves to think about where it is we should be. Are we in Christ? When we read Scripture, do we absorb it as a whole? When we quote the Bible, are we quoting it to convey God's message of hope for the people? Are we sharing it to share the peace of Christ with the world? Do we share it so that the Holy Spirit can bring joy to the disheartened? Do we convey God's justice and forgiveness? Because when I pick up the Bible, I am reading the story of a God who loves. I pick it up and I find a forgiving God. I find a God who loves justice. I discover a God who's full of mercy and grace. So, when I quote the Bible, I want to make sure that I'm quoting it for the right reason. And that I'm quoting it accurately, conveying the message that it has. Because you can flip the Bible open and confuse yourself by picking verses at random to quote. It is far too easy for us to find a verse we like and separate it from everything else in the Bible. And we forget that none of these verses is in isolation. And no book of the Bible is in isolation. Though it is a book written by many authors from many times and many places, it comes together to tell the story of one God.

So here is my challenge for you in this season of Lent. That every day each and every one of us sits down with Scripture. Be it a Lenten reading plan, using a daily devotional, however you would like to engage, I simply encourage you to engage. If you need help in finding one, please talk to me, I am more than happy to help. But however you do engage, I pray that we may reflect on our reading to ask ourselves just a few simple questions. What does this tell me about God? What does this tell me about how to live? What is this saying to me today? I pray that each of us can grow in our understanding of Scripture so that when we open this book, we do so with the desire to understand the God who loves us. That we open it wanting to grow with Christ at each and every turn. That we let the Spirit guide us so that we reach a greater understanding of God's grace so that we may share that grace with others. And that each of us will find that our Lenten journey has brought us closer to God, and prepared us to renew ourselves in our own ministry, that we too may proclaim the Kingdom of Heaven has come near. Amen.

Prayer of Confession and Pardon: God, you are with us even when we turn away from you. Guide us back into your loving arms. Judge us not by the perfection of our actions but show us mercy and love. We have strayed like lost sheep from your ways, failing both in what we have done and what we have failed to do. Bring us back into your fold that you may guide us and lead us in all things. For the sake of your Son, Jesus Christ, have mercy upon us and forgive us. May we walk in your love and trust your ways. Amen.

Almighty God have mercy upon you. May the Lord forgive all your sins and lift you up in love through Jesus Christ our Lord, and by the Holy Spirit keep you in life eternal. Amen.

Offering: If you are so moved to make an offering, you may send it to the church treasurer, or you may send it to the PO Box listed below. We are still the church, and the church still needs your support to keep doing all the important work that we do.

Lord's Prayer

Dismissal with Blessing: May we go forth reflecting God's love in our lives as we go forth in the peace of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Our Current Series – Lenten Journey

Our current series is a journey through Lent. Each week we have a story of Jesus that helps us as we prepare ourselves during Lent. As we travel through these forty days with Christ, we learn important lessons along the way.

February 26th – *To the Wilderness* – Matthew 3:13-4:17

March 5th – *Meeting by Night* – John 3:1-17

March 12th – *Going to the Well* – John 4:5-42

March 19th – *Seeing the Path* – John 9:1-41

March 26th – *Visiting Friends* – John 11:1-45

Prayer List

Rev Charliam Renner	Bishop Frank Beard	Our Conference	Our Healthcare Workers
Patti Corder and the Greenup Ambulance Crew		Our Healthcare Workers	Eric Veach
Ed & Verna Titus	Henry Catey	Jake Kiser	Cindy Cisney
Tricia Adkins	Don Stewart	Ronnie Winstead	Lauren Stewart
Phyllis Gabel	Tom Finley	Laura Carlen	Rosie Chancellor
Chuck Hogan	Brittany Gilbert	Jackie Potter	Phil Hawickhorst
Ray Carr	Jane Williams	Alice Sherwood	Richard Durham
Kathy Hanks	Steve Carlen	Emily Blade	Tim Schnauz
Donna Carlen	Ernie Peters	Jess Shoot	Alberta Darling
Stanley Kiser	Corrine Howard	Stacy Janes	Don Gilmore
Shirley Jester	Connie Brown	Jim Irwin	Gary & Mary Winterrowd
Leo Smith	Sue & Bob Smyser	Larry Thompson	Evelyn Sue Icenogle
Kristen & Zach Morecraft	Greg Williams	Martha Roberts	Charlie & Charlotte Baxter
Paul Schulte	Lavon Figgins	Janet Freeman	

Rev Camron D St. Michael

<https://stmichael.pw>

cdstmichael@outlook.com

(316)530-3182 (call or text)

PO Box 54, Charleston IL, 61920

* Scripture quotations are taken from the New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition. Copyright © 2021 National Council of Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide.

+ Scripture quotations are from the Common English Bible, Copyright © 2011 by Common English Bible.