

Sunday Sermon
March 5, 2017
“Forty Days, Six Sundays”
Matthew 4:1-11

Introduction

Last Sunday, Transfiguration Sunday, we went to the mountaintop with Jesus. This Sunday, the first Sunday of Lent, we enter the wilderness with him. The forty days plus six Sundays of this purple season of penitence can take us on a journey through some dry, barren places.

We started the journey and the countdown of the days on Wednesday, marking the first day with a black smudge of ashes. Now we are down to thirty-six days and six Sundays. Not long, really. And yet a lot can happen in six weeks. Some things we already know:

- Spring will arrive on Monday, March 20, officially. It started slipping in ahead of schedule, but this weekend’s weather slowed it down.
- Daylight Savings Time will return, and we will lose an hour next Sunday, March 12.
- The brackets for the Big Dance in basketball will be set next Sunday evening. The first play-in games will be March 14. Championship game will be April 3. We do not know how our teams will do. Before last night’s game, the odds to win for UNC were 6/1, for Duke 11/1.
- And then, thanks to April 15 landing on a Saturday, our obligations to the government will not be due until the week after Easter.

Those things we know. But there are other things we do not know about these next six weeks:

- What will be going on nationally and internationally?
- Will there be conflict with groups here, with other nations?
- What will the economy do? What will the Dow do?
- Will we stay well or will there be illness?

I

A lot can happen in six weeks. When we pick up our lesson today in Matthew’s gospel, Jesus has just been baptized by John in the Jordan River. The Spirit of God, Matthew says, has descended upon Jesus, and the voice of God has spoken saying, “This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.”

And then, Matthew says, the Spirit leads Jesus into the wilderness for a time of preparation and testing. “Let’s go to Table Rock,” the song says on the Burke County CD “and leave our world for the wilderness.” Have you entered the

wilderness for Lent? The wilderness can be a desolate, foreboding place, a place of temptations, tests, and trials.

I recall one Sunday morning when, thanks to the flu, I was home. So I watched on television the service of First Presbyterian of Charlotte. They had a baptism that morning as part of the service, an infant baptism. We expect infant baptisms to be sweet, a beautiful baby in a spotless white gown, sleeping peacefully in a parent's arms.

Only in this service, the child started crying—no, correct that—he started screaming. The minute he was brought to the baptismal font, he started screaming, and he screamed the entire time. It was amazing that a child that tiny could produce so much volume. The minister had to shout the questions to the parents, shout the question to the congregation, shout the prayer over the water, shout to the baby to tell him he was a child of the covenant, sealed in the Spirit.

The parents were beside themselves, of course. But I thought, way to go kid. You show us the way it really is. We are not baptized in a sweet world that keeps us protected in loving arms while we sleep peacefully. We are baptized in a world of temptations, tests, and trials. It is a wilderness out there. We should all go to the baptismal font kicking and screaming.

II

Jesus' hair is still wet from his baptism, and he finds himself in the wilderness. Forty days he spends there alone, fasting and praying. And when he is completely exhausted, completely famished, the devil comes to tempt him.

Have you ever been hungry, really hungry? I do not mean hungry for food. I mean hungry in your soul, alone and vulnerable. Have you ever felt the devil nipping at your heels? If you have, then you know something about being in the wilderness.

And I am guessing one of the things you experienced was wondering where God is. Why does God not send a rescue team or at least a raven with some bread? Why does God not give you the ability to rear up and scream so loudly that the devil runs away and never comes back?

The devil first tempts Jesus physically, to change stones to bread as an easy solution to the hunger of the moment. Then he tempts Jesus with fame and prestige: Do something spectacular. Throw yourself from the pinnacle of the temple. Surely God will command angels to protect you. Finally the devil tempts Jesus with political power: I will give you all the kingdoms of the world, if you will fall down and worship me.

It must have been tempting, the lure of prosperity, prestige, and power. After all, that is what people want to see in a leader. That is what people think they want in a Messiah and a Savior.

But this is a story where we see how the Son of God differs from the leaders of this world. Jesus comes not to be served by the world, but to serve the world

sacrificially, redeeming it through love. So Jesus accepts the risks and faces the temptations, tests and trails, choosing to be One with us in this wilderness world.

III

It is a tough world out there. It is hard to hold up against evil. But the wilderness can make us better people, more wise, more mature, more understanding. We can develop courage, endurance, tolerance, good judgment. We can learn to depend more on God.

Or the wilderness can bring out the worst in us. We can become desperate, hard-hearted, hopeless, intolerant, selfish, caring only for our own survival. We can turn away instead of toward God when that devilish voice in our heads asks, "If you are a child of God, shouldn't things be going a little smoother for you? If you are really a Christian, shouldn't you be happier, healthier, more blessed?"

Jesus endured in the temptations and tests, and he was strengthened and prepared for his ministry and his ultimate test, suffering and death on the cross. Our wilderness temptations and tests can strengthen and prepare us for challenges ahead. But most of all our wilderness experiences help us see what an amazing victory Jesus accomplished for us on the cross.

Conclusion

Six weeks from today people will go to churches to celebrate Easter without having experienced the journey of Lent. They will go as if the joy of the resurrection can be realized apart from the tests and trials of facing sin and mortality. But true celebration and true understanding only comes after time spent in the wilderness.

A lot can happen on our six-week journey through Lent. But evil will not have the last word. God in Christ is with us. We have an advocate, a protector. Go with Jesus into the wilderness, and let his kind of power become the power that transforms your life. Amen.