

Out Into the Wilderness

(Preached by Cheryl Williams at Footscray Baptist Church March 9th, 2025 – Luke 4:1-13)

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Here is my beloved Son, listen to him. God's words at Jesus' baptism and his transfiguration. Events in the life of Jesus at the beginning of his ministry.

Today we find Jesus led by God's Spirit out into the wilderness.

The wilderness¹, endless space, harsh light, vast sky, dry earth, rocks, birds circling, lizards scuttling, a solitary bush and no shelter. A lonely place with a parched landscape.

For forty days and nights Jesus is led to pray, where he fasted and finds himself tempted.

It is into this situation that Jesus is led by the Spirit, Mark puts it more forcefully than Luke, where he says, 'driven'.

My question is why?

It seems to me, that as this falls at the beginning of Jesus' public ministry. if this is the time in which Jesus is trying to figure out just how he will go about his task, to figure out what will be important, what will be the main focus of his public ministry. Perhaps this is a time of clarification for Jesus.

Traditionally the church has seen this story as one of temptation and how Jesus shows us how to overcome such temptation. Lent, the season in which we are now in, has then been the time where we put such into practice, we decide what tempts us and then say we will give it up for the forty days of Lent. So, we give up sugar or chocolate or alcohol and the like. We use the idea of the devil as though our temptations come from outside of us, and I would argue, that enables us to avoid responsibility for making bad choices – 'the devil made me do it'.

I wonder if we might look at this story from a slightly different angle this morning.

Jesus has been led out into the wilderness where he prays and reflects on who he is and what he is to do. It is in that context we find him tempted. Three temptations – food, power and self-protection. These are not bad temptations in themselves, food is necessary for life. Power used in the right way can make a difference. Self-protection and safety, makes sense if we are to be of any use to others.

Let's look more closely at each temptation, the way Jesus responds to each and what we learn, that we then can put into practice, in our journey of faith.

1. A famished Jesus is tempted to turn stones into bread.
2. Authority over everything and everyone (wouldn't Trump kill for that!)
3. Put yourself in danger and then wait for God and his angels to protect you.

¹ Description of the desert taken from a reflection by Christian Maclean in 'In Love with the Life of Life', Neil Paynter (ed), Wild Goose Publications, 2020.

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Each time, Jesus responds to the temptation with the words of Scripture and sets up how he will carry out his ministry.

1. We do not live by bread alone. Jesus will go on to feed people both with bread but also spiritual food, he will teach people how to live physically and spiritually.
2. Worship God and serve only Him – Jesus will turn the idea of power on its head. He will go about empowering others, he will not Lord it over others, he will serve them.
3. Do not put God to the test – Jesus throughout his ministry never puts God to the test, even at the cross, where ironically, he is taunted by others to save himself, he simply asks that they might be forgiven, because they didn't understand what they were doing, what they were participating in.

So, Jesus faces these temptations and in doing so is guided by God's word. He clarifies for himself and for us the kind of person he will be and the kind of ministry he will have.

As we begin Lent, I would like to invite you to undertake a practice that might aid your reflection during this season. You have been given this morning a finger labyrinth and a small pebble.

A labyrinth is an aid to prayer. You enter the labyrinth and make your way along the path to its centre. As you walk (using your finger and pebble) this morning, I will prompt you to think about those things that you might need to let go of. You will then stay at the centre for a short time where again I will prompt you with some words of reassurance from God. You will then slowly retrace your steps as you make your way out of the labyrinth. Again, I will prompt you with a question to ponder as you move out back into the world.

I am hoping this might be a technique you can use each week during Lent and each week, I will give you some questions to guide your walk, based on the readings for the day.

So, for the rest of the reflection time, I would like you to take this walk. Sit comfortably, have your finger labyrinth with you and your pebble in your hand as I guide you through.

1. Beginning at the entrance with your pebble in your hand slowly make your way along the path to the centre. As you do, think about those things that consume you, think about those things that you consume that are unnecessary, think about the times you have used power over others, think about the times when you have sought to protect yourself to the detriment of others, when you have put yourself first. Slowly walk toward the centre.
2. Now at the centre simply rest a while. Give to God all those things you have just thought about, give God your burden, leave it at his feet. Remember God is your refuge, your safe place. Know that God will protect you, that God loves you, forgives you and frees you. You are beloved by God.
3. Now begin to leave the centre and retrace your steps. Listen to Jesus voice – worship God and serve only him. As you walk think about the ways in which you can serve God as you go out into the world.

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As you now go into Lent and this time of preparation and reflection for and on Easter, may you know God's care, God's word, God's protection and God's provision. Amen.

