

God Moves... into the Desert

March 10, 2019

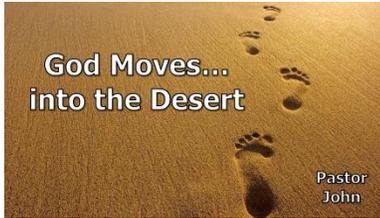
Scripture: Luke 4: 1-13

¹ Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, ² where for forty days he was tempted by the devil. He ate nothing at all during those days, and when they were over, he was famished. ³ The devil said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread." ⁴ Jesus answered him, "It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone.'"

⁵ Then the devil led him up and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. ⁶ And the devil said to him, "To you I will give their glory and all this authority; for it has been given over to me, and I give it to anyone I please. ⁷ If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours." ⁸ Jesus answered him, "It is written, 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.'"

⁹ Then the devil took him to Jerusalem, and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here, ¹⁰ for it is written, 'He will command his angels concerning you, to protect you,' ¹¹ and 'On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.'"

¹² Jesus answered him, "It is said, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'" ¹³ When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time.



Lent began just four days ago as we worshipped on Ash Wednesday. Lent is traditionally a season when we look within and seek to be right with God. We try and find those things, often called sins, that we need to lay aside to draw closer to God. We sometimes give up something – by denying ourselves we offer a type of sacrifice to God. We sometimes add in something – also a kind of sacrifice because we have to make time for that extra prayer time or small group study. In making time, we must give something else up. All of this is done for the purpose of being “ready” for Easter Sunday. Today we look at the passage from Luke 4, where Jesus goes out into the wilderness to test himself – to see if He is prepared to begin His ministry. Let us pray...

Each Sunday for the next six weeks we will look at ways that God moved in our world through Jesus. Today we look at how Jesus moved out into the wilderness. Over the next six weeks we will journey with Jesus past obstacles, over fences, down the road, as we empty ourselves, to the cross, and out of the tomb. There will be a lot of moving in this sermon series.

To begin this journey, I ask: can you remember the last time you moved? Some of you have lived in Winner all of your life. Some have gone off to college and have come back to Winner. Others here today have moved around a bit. And maybe some of you are like me - you have moved a lot. In my 53 years, I have lived in 20 different homes in 14 different towns in five different states. Moving can be both a positive and a negative thing. There is the



packing up and loading and the unloading and unpacking. There is the work to find a new school, a new job, new friends, a new church. There is the stress of finding our way, of fitting in, and of always feeling a little lost. On the other hand, for some there is the adventure of discovering a new place, of entering a new phase of your life, of sometimes starting anew. In the process of moving, we can often discover new things about ourselves. One of the things we can learn is how much stuff we have. Another thing we can learn is how hard it is to leave friends and familiarity and comfort behind. And lastly, we learn how well or how poorly we deal with stress and new environments and new people. As I reflected back on the many moves I made as a child, I realized that I do not have any lifelong friends. I also realized that up to about third grade, all my memories are still pictures – snapshots, if you will. It is upon moving to Enfield, Connecticut, in 1973, that I start to have memories that are like mini-movies.

In the season of Lent, though, I hope we all do some moving. The first move I hope we all make as individuals and as a church is to move closer to God. In doing so we all have the chance to move within or to look inward as we move closer to the cross. You are invited to move deeper into the Biblical story of Jesus as His ministry unfolds, as He journeys this earth. You are invited to look inwards, to survey your own landscape, your soul, so to speak, to see the things that God wants to reshape or remold or remove or refine. Lent is a season of moving inward for introspection and self-evaluation. It is my hope and prayer that we all spend some time doing this each day during this season of Lent.

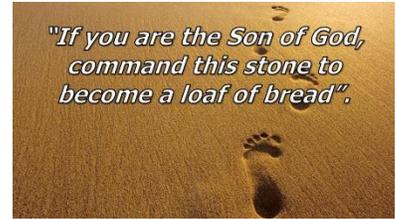
As we begin this Lenten journey together, we see that Jesus moved out into the wilderness or desert to discover some things about Himself. But this was not Jesus' first move. The first one was the incarnation, when Jesus moved into the flesh. In the flesh, Jesus discovered a whole new set of realities. Life as a human being came with a whole other set of experiences. For about 30 years, this was Jesus' life. Growing up, learning the family business, living amongst people. And then, led by the Holy Spirit, Jesus moves out into desert. It is here that Jesus experiences some difficult physical tests and some spiritual challenges.



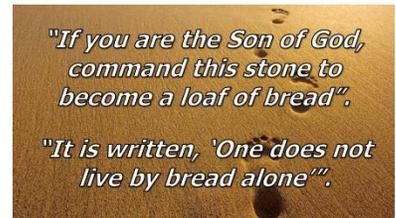
When we think about the writer of the gospel, we need to understand that there was purpose to the testing taking place in the wilderness or desert. Our Lenten small group book makes this point: "Luke wanted his readers to see Jesus totally alone, on the verge of collapse, and close to being broken". Jesus was not battling Satan in the comfort of his living room. He was not facing Satan well-rested and on a full stomach. The wilderness represents a place we experience too. It is that space that is beyond challenging for us. Here, the trials and sufferings and temptations become excruciating and terrifying and soul-depleting and spirit-breaking. As it was with Jesus, it is in our wilderness moments that the devil comes calling too.

In the desert, Jesus walked through some difficult challenges. For us as well, these are the toughest tests that you and I can face. He was first tempted to produce bread. Bread is one of the basic necessities or staples of life.

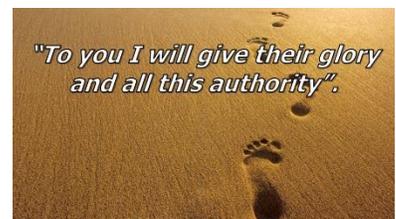
Satan tempted Jesus, in His time of extreme hunger, to make bread. Tempting Him, Satan said, *"If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread"*. It was not Satan offering Jesus some wheat



and asking Him to make bread. Jesus was being tempted to magically turn the stone into bread, to use His power to meet His own needs. Sometimes we also turn to God, looking for the magical. But our faith should not be about looking for the magical things that God can "do" for us. Our faith is about remaining faithful to God and about clinging to God in this present reality. But if we are honest, we must admit that it can be a struggle. We want our desires to be met. Self can have a loud voice. Small group study author Thomas Ehrich puts it this way: "It is turning down the terrible engine of self, we chose to stand with God". Jesus responded to Satan's temptation by saying, *"It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone'"*. Faith is a connection to God. True life comes from being connected to the creator and redeemer through a trusting relationship. True life is the eternal reward for a life lived in obedience to God.

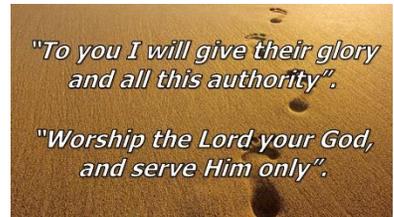


Satan's second test of Jesus centers around power and wealth. It is something we all desire. From atop the world, Satan shows Jesus all the kingdoms of the earth and says, *"To you I will give their glory and all this authority"*. Satan and the culture around us tell us the same lie: "if we just give in to the tempter we can have everything we want". It is a lie that many people buy

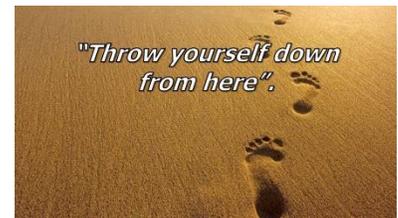


into. Think back to the steroid scandals, to the rampant cheating on tests and taxes, to the many affairs people have, to how easily we slip into some good

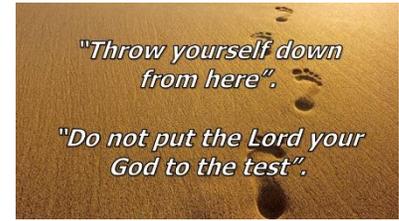
gossip. In our day to day life, we are inundated by advertisements and commercials that promise us happiness, beauty, great sex, long life, and victory over our neighbors or opponents or team mates or office mates. When Jesus is offered all the kingdoms of the world, His response what our response should be: loyalty belongs to God alone. Jesus' reply is straight forward and cuts to the heart of our relationship with God. To Satan, Jesus says, *"Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him"*. Thomas Ehrich brings us back to this truth as he writes, "Faith isn't a tool for having our needs met or our desires fulfilled. Faith is its own reward. Knowing God is its own reward". There is only one worthy of our worship and praise. That is God.



The third temptation centers around testing God as Satan brings Jesus to the pinnacle of the temple and challenges Jesus, saying, *"throw yourself down from here"*. Let's see if the angels swoop in and save you. Satan knew that Jesus had come for more than a season of tempting in the wilderness. He knew that God would rescue Jesus. In a way, we can do a similar thing as we try and become equal with God. We like to be in control, to call the shots, to think we are God. As author Thomas Ehrich writes about this temptation, he writes that we can see that "by forcing God to protect Him, Jesus could manipulate God into acting". Sometimes we play a similar game. Have you ever prayed the "God, if you will... then I will..." prayers? If you will just do this God, then I will... This gets into a dangerous territory when we try and barter or deal with God. It leads to this kind of thinking: "If I pray hard enough... if I serve enough... if I give enough... then God will bless me".



Jesus' response to Satan's temptation was this: *"Do not put the Lord your God to the test"*. May it be ours as well. Instead of testing God, we must choose to submit to God's will, to adapt to God's ways, and to listen for God's bidding and direction in our lives. May we trust in God's plans for our lives.



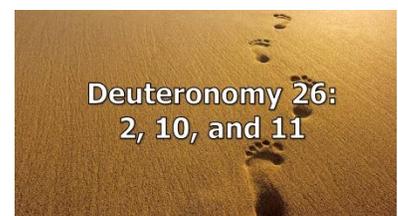
Lent is about submission to God's will and God's ways. It is about being willing to look within with the stated purpose of becoming less worldly and more holy. It is an intentional journey to draw closer to God and to deepen our faith. That was the purpose of the journey that Thomas Ehrich set out upon in the season of Lent a few years ago as he set out to write this book. He writes, "Like Paul I was leaving behind the world of the familiar and the predictable, setting out on a journey where everything would be decidedly less clear-cut. I was called to be totally engaged with God while safely and successfully navigating the unknown road ahead". Like Jesus, as He headed into the wilderness, like the Israelites as they left Egypt, we too head into season of Lent, not knowing how God will change us, but hoping He will.

As we begin this journey, we must also acknowledge that we are all a work in progress. "I suspect we are all, in our own way, just getting started in trying to be God's people in the world". Give yourselves some grace because we are all just starting out, trying to make a fresh response to God's call, bravely stepping out with little idea about what lays ahead, trusting God as we go.

In a way, we mirror the Israelite's as they first left Egypt, slaves no more. They followed after Moses not really knowing where they were going. Yes, to the Promised Land, but where was that? They trusted, and God led. The story of the journey can be found in Deuteronomy 26. While the Israelites were in the wilderness, they constantly tested God. They grumbled and complained. They even longed to go back, to be slaves again. The way was ahead unclear, so their faith stumbled at times.

We all move through desert times in our lives too. They are seasons of loneliness, emptiness, temptation to sin. We can also experience our own "wilderness" times in other ways. Our wilderness times can occur outside the Emergency room, after the divorce papers have been served, when we learn that we have been cut from the team. Just as it was with Satan's temptations of Jesus, just as it was with the Israelites when they longed for the good old days, "when times are tough, as they inevitably will be, the evil one tries to draw us inside a bubble where we lose touch with reality". There we can become isolated and alone. But God is always calling out, always reaching out, always whispering in our ear, always calling us back to Him.

God did not leave the Israelites in the desert either. God led the "*wandering Arameans*" through lap after lap around the desert and finally into the Promised Land. As they looked back, they could see how God was faithful. This week in the lectionary readings, I read about the results of the journey. Deuteronomy 26, verses 2 through 11, is known as the "Deuteronomic Creed".

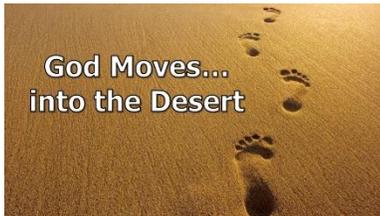


Like our Apostles or Nicene Creed, it is a statement of faith. But unlike these creeds, the Deuteronomic Creed is also a call to action. Reading verses 2, 10, and 11, hear of the call to action that pleases God:

2 You shall take some of the first of all the fruit of the ground, which you harvest from the land that the LORD your God is giving you, and you shall put it in a basket and go to the place that the LORD your God will choose as a dwelling for his name... 10 So now I bring the first of the fruit of the ground that you, O LORD, have given me. You shall set it down before the LORD your God and bow down before the LORD your God. 11 Then you, together with the Levites and the aliens who reside among you, shall celebrate with all the bounty that the LORD your God has given to you and to your house.

For many of us, this call to action might sound like a step out into the wilderness. God directed the people to bring in the first fruits of the harvest – trusting that God will provide more. Lay them before God and rejoice in the blessings that He has given. Today we call this “tithing”. In the Deuteronomic creed we find the story of divine providence at work. We experience this in our lives too. We have all been blessed by God - sometimes in spite of ourselves. God has remained faithful through the millions of times we stumble and fall. Because of God’s faithfulness, we too can learn to make the intuitive leap from our own form of disobedience and bondage to sin. Because of our own experiences with God’s faithfulness in our lives, we too can place ourselves in the creed. Faith then becomes the act of recognizing the liberation from sin that we

experience when we trust and follow God. That place of freedom is found when we trust fully in God and believe in Him with all of our heart, soul, mind, and strength. The season of Lent invites us to do just that.



As we begin this Lenten journey together, where are you questioning or doubting God? I encourage you to journey forward in full faith. As Jesus said, *"Do not put the Lord your God to the test"*. Trust in God. He is faithful. As this 40-day journey is just getting under way, where are you hoping that God comes through, offering you a miracle or being more present in your life? Know as Christ knew: *"One does not live by bread alone"*. Turn to the Word. The Bible is the bread of life. As we enter together into this time of repentance and reflection, what are you chasing after instead of God, hoping to find purpose and meaning in life? *"Worship the Lord your God and serve only him"*. Jesus is the only way, truth, and life. Worship the Lord, serve Him only.

As Easter people, as we go out into the wilderness, out into the desert, out into the world, may we rely on Jesus to walk with us through it all. He is our hope, our peace, our contentment. When we find ourselves in the wilderness, when we are hard-pressed with temptation from the evil one, when we don't want to look within to see what God is seeking to refine and reshape in us, may we turn to Jesus. He has faced the trials and temptations and held fast to God. He has won the victory. Jesus wants to walk with you and me, today, tomorrow, and each day, through Easter and beyond. May we walk closely with Jesus. Amen.

GPS – Grow, Pray, Serve

- 1) As we begin this Lenten journey together, where are you questioning or doubting God?
- 2) Where are you hoping that God comes through, offering you a miracle or being more present in your life?
- 3) What are you chasing after instead of God, hoping to find purpose and meaning in life?