

## **The Heart of the Wilderness**

March 9, 2025 at First Church in Cambridge, Congregational, UCC

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*Texts: Luke 4: 1-13*

Please, will you pray with me. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts together be acceptable to you, oh God, my rock and my redeemer. Amen.

Good morning, beloveds! Happy first Sunday of Lent and first Sunday of the light lingering longer into the evenings – we made it! And well done making it to church on time with the time change. I promise I won't be offended if you yawn – I'm right there with you.

Today, the heart of our service is the beloved First Church healing ritual, which I know we all deeply need right now. Right on time. So this reflection will be brief, but I couldn't resist grounding us in Luke on this first Sunday of Lent as we prepare to follow Luke's account of Jesus' ministry throughout the season of Lent, and as we center ourselves in our Lenten theme of "Wellsprings in the Wilderness."

Today, in this passage we just read from Luke, we meet Jesus shortly after his baptism in the river Jordan, where he has been called God's beloved child and filled with the Holy Spirit. Luke tells us that Jesus is led into the wilderness by the Holy Spirit, where he spends 40 days and nights alone, fasting from all food. Luke doesn't tell us why Jesus went into the wilderness – just that the Holy Spirit led him there. Jesus might not have even known why. But filled with the spirit, he was willing to listen and to follow.

We go into the wilderness when we're lost, and also when we're seeking to be found – to encounter ourselves differently, to see life more

clearly, to seek and dance with God. Jesus spends time in the desert, in the wilderness of the Earth, as some of us may have done before. Maybe you haven't spent time alone in the mountains, but you've been in a wilderness of spirit, encountering uncharted territory and the vastness of the unknown – facing down a life-changing diagnosis, a marriage you had counted on to last that is ending, a call from deep within towards a truer gender expression, a nation you love in a kind of turmoil you didn't think you'd see in your lifetime. There's a sparseness to the wilderness, sometimes a fear, sometimes a transcendent beauty and a sense that you are part of something much larger. It's raw, and challenging, sometimes terrifying, often beautiful. Wilderness experiences bring us right down to the bone and test us.

And in our story this morning, Jesus is indeed tested. There is so much to say about this story – about each of the devil's tests of Jesus, about the mental and spiritual jiu-jitsu of Jesus' responses, about how we conceive of the devil in the first place, and what the devil represents to us. Sermons for future years! I really see how someone can spend a lifetime preaching and still just scratch the surface.

So today, I want us to look at the story through a particular lens: what is the devil asking Jesus to worship? The Lucan writer tells us that Jesus was famished at the end of his fast, and the devil came to him, saying, "If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread." The devil is poking at Jesus' weak point, his hunger, and asking Jesus to worship his own power, his own dominion over nature, his self-satisfaction. Then the devil goes on to ask Jesus to worship the devil's power – look, here are all the kingdoms of the world. They have been given to me, and I will give them over to you along with all the authority and glory, if you worship me. Worship my power, and my power and dominion over the earth will become yours. Finally, the devil asks Jesus to test God by throwing himself from the pinnacle of the temple and seeing if God's angels

would indeed catch Jesus – a test designed to center or worship doubt or a desire for certainty.

Does any of this sound familiar? Powerful forces asking us to worship false gods – the idols of power, domination, money, productivity, beauty, our own sense of “goodness,” illusions of certainty... Much of our dominant culture is set up to worship those false gods, and many of our current national leaders make idols of money, domination, and power – their own and others’. It takes work and steadfastness and digging deep and community and ritual in the midst of those pressures to remember who and what we truly worship – who and what our God truly is.

A few years ago, I had my own wilderness experience out in the mountains of California. I was there with a group of others, all of us participating in a wilderness-based rites of passage program that gathered us together in village for five days and then sent us out on the land to our own solo spots for four days and four nights. Many of us fasted. Measly, really, compared to Jesus’s 40 days and 40 nights, but they felt like an eternity.

We were deep in the Inyo mountains, one of the oldest continental mountain ranges in the US, which is a dry, desert ecosystem of junipers and pinion pines and dust and rocks. There was the occasional bird companion, searching for pine nuts from the pinions, but otherwise I was utterly alone – no animals, no other humans – wilderness.

One evening, lonely and in need of perspective, I hiked up a nearby rise. I walked down the spine of this ridge toward the sun, which was setting behind the Sierras across the valley from us. I felt the immensity of all that was around me, and my own smallness and loneliness in the midst of it. As I reached the end of the ridge, my foot hit something and I looked down – there were rocks lovingly laid in a six-foot-wide heart shape, big

enough for me to sit inside of and take in the sunset.

In the midst of a wilderness where it seemed I was entirely alone, someone else had been there, with who knows what prayers or intentions or stories. Her experience was inherently different from mine, and yet she had made a shape that we both needed. She had made a resting place for presence and love in the midst of the wilderness.

And that's what we are here to practice today. In the context of a world that demands that we worship false idols of domination, power, money, and violence, we come to church to remember that we worship a God whose love is as deep as an aquifer and as wide as the ocean, a God whose love of the oppressed and the brokenhearted demands that we put our bodies and our voices and our witness in the way of those who would have us worship false idols. God lays a stone heart for us out in the wilderness, reminding us that though we might feel forlorn or full of despair or lost, though we might be tested to the depths of our capacity, we are not alone. Others have been here before us. Our spiritual ancestors have been here before us. And as God was with them, God is with us in the wilderness.

Today, beloveds, we'll engage in two rituals that connect us back to those ancestor companions and remind us who and what we truly worship. In a few moments, we'll enter a time of healing, when you'll be invited to come to a healing team and unburden your heart from whatever you are carrying and receive a touch of oil on your forehead and a healing prayer. This practice, of sharing our heartaches and our worries and our heavy loads with each other, of anointing with oil, stretches back centuries. It is a stone heart on a mountain ridge left by our ancestors, a wellspring in the wilderness, a chance to remember that God is with us in all of it.

And a little later in the service, during the Offering, you'll be invited to come to the font back here and be with the water, anointing yourself, stirring it up, gazing into its clarity. Many of you may have brought water from home, from your own wellsprings. I love to think of the journeys all that water has made to be in our baptismal font today – the snowflakes and raindrops it has been, the mountains it has collected over in thunderclouds, the gutters it has flowed through, transforming itself year after year to be here with us now, reminding us of the spiritual sustenance our faith offers to us.

Jesus knew something about wellsprings in the wilderness. In the heat and dry air of the desert, famished, having not eaten for forty days, facing the devil, his faith made for him a stone heart on a ridgeline: a place to root down and remember, even faced with tests that asked him to worship power, domination, doubt, and the illusion of certainty, that God is deeper and wider and truer than all of that. Beloveds, today we remember, with Jesus, that the God of justice, love, and liberation that Jesus called Abba is our wellspring, and we remember how to stay awake for the infinite life-giving ways in which they sustain us in the wilderness. Amen.