

**SPIRIT OF WILDERNESS**  
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First Sunday in Lent  
Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church

**Luke 4:1-13**

*Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness where for forty days he was tempted by the devil.*

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This is not the wilderness and you are not Jesus. But for the moment let's say this sanctuary *is* the wilderness and you *are* Jesus. So, if *this* is the wilderness and *you* are Jesus, then, what does that make *me*? *Pleased to meet you. Won't you guess my name?* That's right. I'm the *devil*.

My job for the moment is to bedevil you by posing options for your consideration. So here goes.

First, let's notice that this lesson (Luke 4:1-13) is cropped. A lectionary by definition slices a small piece of text out of a larger whole. It's like slicing a 3-inch square from a 12-foot mural. The small piece might be interesting in and of itself but there's a lot missing. So it is with this text. We don't see what's on either side. But there's nothing that says we can't look.

On the front side of this wilderness story is the story of Jesus' baptism. As the story goes, Jesus trekked to the Jordan River, that legendary river that the Israelites had crossed a thousand years earlier with high hopes of building on a promise, a promise to bless all families, tribes and nations of the world. To make a long story short, things turned out badly. The promise to "build the land that God had planned where love shines through" fizzled and turned sour just as the promise of Christ's "new community" has fizzled time and time again. The church has turned out badly. Often.

It's not that the promise is invalid. It's that people mess up. But people can also repent. And so Jesus trekked out to the Jordan River with many other compatriots who wanted to repent, which is to say, turn around, come clean and start anew. Jesus returned to the formative roots of his tradition and stood with those who wanted to return to the true way. We know the feeling. We, too, want to go back and start over. But we can go back only so far. The way is forward.

On the other side of this wilderness story is the story of Jesus standing in the synagogue, the meeting house of his hometown Nazareth where for centuries the Jewish tradition had been recited week after week.

Jesus wanted to start over but he didn't start from scratch. He stood within his tradition. But, as we'll find out, he would not stand still. Nor would he accept all of his tradition. He ignored and rejected parts just as we can reject and ignore parts of our own Christian tradition.

In between standing in the Jordan River and standing in the synagogue Jesus wandered into the wilderness just as his people, the Israelites had once wandered in a wilderness. As the old story goes, the Israelites went in as a motley chaotic bunch of former slaves obsessed with bread and survival, without a clue on how to live as free human being.

After 40 years of wandering, they came out as a community, with an identity, a promise, and a mission.

Jesus was baptized in the Jordan and went home the way we go home after ours and settle in and down. But that, as it turns out, is not the Spirit's way. The Spirit got hold of Jesus and led him into the wilderness. That's the Spirit's way. The Spirit often nudges us into unfamiliar terrain, outside our comfort zone, to see what will become of us. That same Spirit is within the natural world. It's one and the same Spirit.

The story of evolution reveals a Spirit or Force that keeps moving things forward by trial and error, pushing into uncharted waters, shaping new forms of life. Evolution doesn't stand still. The Spirit is not done with our species. Over the past 10,000 years or so we have just begun to evolve on the consciousness level. But some of us get stuck in backward places. Which brings us to these three temptations.

These are not the temptations of popular jokes—to eat chocolate, drink alcohol, fornicate, cheat on taxes or accept an obscene bonus. Much more is at stake here. These three temptations are couched in symbolic language to expose fundamental choices humans have faced and still face. These are fundamental temptations that humans encounter in a variety of ways.

We aren't literally asked to turn stones into bread, or sell our souls to the devil in exchange for world power, privilege and glory, or to jump off high pinnacles so God can save us. That's just the way this story is told.

In this story Jesus may stand as the personification of the human species, as the prop or icon of human conscious evolution. These three temptations recapitulate human history and raise the question: what does it mean to be human. Humans have passed through these three phases though some get stuck.

The first is: If you're going to be a human being then you must work hard. You must extract a living from the earth (stones). It's what our species learned hundreds of thousand of years ago and some of us have learned nothing more. We try to make something out this world. But, as it turns out, work or mere survival is not enough to satisfy the human heart. The human heart cannot live by bread alone.

Well, then, says the devilish one, if work and survival isn't enough, go for glory. Build empires. Conquer other people Accumulate things and status, revel in fame and glory, privilege and power even if you sell your soul for it. It's what some of our kind have done and keep doing. But things, fame and glory will not satisfy the human heart or build the new community. You must serve God, Jesus replies, citing his people's tradition.

Alright, says the devil, I can see you're into God. Good for you! So, then, if mere survival is not enough and the world is not enough by all means give your life over to God. Let's organize religions and promote piety. No, says Jesus, that understanding of an interventionist, miracle-working God isn't the right way either. Faith and piety is not enough.

Well, then, you say, where does that leave us. In a pickle, that's where.

Jesus turned his back on those definitions of humanity. He said "no" to consumerism and materialism; no to triumphalism and empire; and "no" to religiosity and popular

understandings of God. So, then, we ask: what did he say “yes” to?

And that brings us back to him standing in his hometown synagogue. He found the place in the scroll of the prophet Isaiah (our Isaiah 61) where it says:

‘The Spirit of the Lord is upon me. The Spirit has anointed me to bring good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, and to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.’ Then the story says: Jesus stopped there.

Why did he stop there when there were a lot more lines in the ancient scroll. He stopped there because the next line was “and the day of vengeance of our God.”

Why did he stop short? Because he would not accept all that his tradition enshrined. He would not accept a God who sanctioned hatred and vengeance.

He rolled up the scroll. Looked at his people and said in so many words: Believe me when I tell you, I’m going to do this. This is going to happen. I will form a community of people around this promise of love even if it kills me.

People, nations and churches are tempted time and time again to settle for a lesser way of being human—to work for nothing but survival and creaturely comforts; to pursue fame and fortune, conquest and empire in small and global ways; or to embrace God, piety and faith and settle down in certainty and security.

We can stop at anyone of those places, too. But we don’t have to. The Spirit calls us to grow up in Christ, which is to say, grow into Love.

There are many ways to read this story of Christ’s temptations. This is one. Perhaps it’s bewildering but the Spirit of wilderness likes it that way. A lot of good things come out of bewilderment.