

The Wilderness

St. Francis of Assisi Episcopal Church Novato

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Jesus is led out into the wilderness

By the Holy Spirit

Luke says and

He is there for 40 days and

The devil shows up and tempts Jesus

It doesn't say with what until the very end

At which point we get these very vivid images of

Jesus and the devil

Here's the devil offering him a nice warm loaf of bread

When Jesus is starved from his fasting

Then the devil and Jesus are in some great high place

Overlooking the world and

Jesus says no to ruling the world

Lastly we see the devil and Jesus

At the top of the Temple in Jerusalem and

Jesus is refusing to jump off just to

Prove that God would never let him get hurt

This story of the temptation of Jesus in the wilderness

Is the reason we observe the forty days of Lent

We are imitating Jesus' withdrawal into the desert

We are willingly taking on austerity

Agreeing to willingly do without

For the same reason Jesus did

Because we know that spiritual discipline

Is an excellent way to nurture

Our relationship with God

Which is at its heart

What Lent is

Meant to be about

Now some churches and people understand Lent

To be more about how Jesus died for our sins

Their emphasis may be more on

Mourning the death of Jesus and

Lamenting over our sinful nature and
Episcopalians certainly have some of
Each of these in their understanding of Lent as well
It is a time of repentance but
Repentance in the sense of
Using these 40 days
As a time of reflection and correction
We want to become uncomfortable with our sins
Not uncomfortable with God
We want to let go of anything that
Keeps us from God
In Greek the word repent means to change
Not berate

So we give things up for Lent or take something on
We go out into a desert of sorts by doing without
There are no flowers in the church
We stop saying and singing alleluia or
Any joyful songs for that matter
We don't do weddings
The hangings are off the wall and
All the crosses are draped in purple
We take ourselves out into a wilderness of sorts
With the hope that
We will be able to encounter God more easily that
There will not be so much stuff to get in our way
But we also find we encounter
What the Bible calls the devil out there
Who wants to tempt us and
Tell us that this is all a lot of nonsense
So when we get uncomfortable
There's a voice suggesting things
We could be doing that would be
Lots more comfortable
Lots more interesting

What we discover out there too is all the stuff that
We really just don't need
I could call those things sins
I could call them addictions
I could call them needless worry or
The critical voice in your head that

Sounds remarkably like your - fill in the blank – parent or
I could call it my blackberry
Whatever it is that is getting between us and God
Will become abundantly clear out there in the wilderness and
We can then leave behind in the desert

Moses in that first reading we heard is
As I said
Standing on the edge of the desert
A desert he has been wandering in for
40 years with his family and the other Israelites
They didn't exactly choose
This spiritual discipline but
I think it's safe to say the experience eventually
Solidified their relationship with God
They got to know God out there in that desert
They learned to trust God
Think of the bread of angels and
The water from rocks
Learned to listen
Think Ten Commandments
And now after their grueling spiritual journey
They have left behind
Their worship of golden calves and
Their tendency to forget
The God who loves them so much
God has delivered them into
A land of milk and honey

Which is what happens when we dare to
Step out into the wilderness
God is not only with us there but
Brings us out not into the same old place but
Into a new and better place

Most of you have heard me talk of
Going off to the desert by myself in the summer
Usually I go for ten days or so
Some of it is a vacation but
Several days of it are
Set aside as a spiritual retreat
Not an outward bound

Sleeping with the scorpions sort of retreat
But a solitary retreat nevertheless
In which I spend most of my time
Alone and quiet
It's taken me awhile to sort out
How to do this in a way that
Makes it uncomfortable enough to be useful
But not so uncomfortable that
It is dangerous or
I give up completely and
Run screaming to the nearest indoor mall

The place I go is not exactly a monastery
It is in fact a resort
Out on the edge of town
At the foot of a mountain and
Set right in the desert
I can walk out the doors and
See all the way to the horizon in
Almost every direction with
Not one tree blocking my view

From the back doors of the place
I can set off on hard gravelly paths
That lead off into the desert
This is where I find burning bushes
Where water springs up out of rocks
Where God's voice is as clear as the sky

Last summer when I went back to my familiar place
I had a lot on my mind and
I was looking forward to the time away
As always they remembered me and
This time since I was such a good customer
They upgraded me from the
Small room I had reserved
To a huge suite
Which was very nice except
That I was worried that it would not be desert-y enough
Perhaps it would be too comfortable and
There wouldn't be enough spiritual discipline
But I took it anyway and

Settled in to wrestle with the devil in the desert

As I said I was alone and
I went off alone into the desert
The next morning to sit and
Listen and get hot
I spent time meditating and praying and
As planned I began to get lonely and uncomfortable
I let myself get hungry and thirsty
I turned the air conditioner off and got hot
At night I let the room get cold
I forced myself to sit still and be quiet

This is when all the things I should have done
All the things and people I have hurt or neglected
All the mistakes I've ever made
Everything wrong about me
Show up in the quiet lonely stillness
Call them sins or the devil or beasts
It doesn't matter
They come to tempt us to
Either beat ourselves up about how bad we are or
To tempt us to grab for something that
Will make us feel better
They enslave us
They get between us and God

I worked hard on my retreat this year
Harder than usual and
It wasn't until much later that I understood why
It was the bigness of the room
It increased my sense of aloneness
It offered even more temptations than usual to
Let my spiritual work slip and to
Listen to the little devil that
Wanted to watch tv on the big screen all day

It is good to spend time in the wilderness
Once in a while
Whatever your wilderness may be
The Bible picks forty days as a good number
But any number will do

When you get there
Notice the temptation to run for your phone
To grab for a book or a magazine or something to eat
Notice how important it suddenly is to
Go to the mall or to get onto the computer
Just don't give in
Instead sit with the discomfort for awhile with God
And when the time comes to leave
We will walk out of the wilderness
But it won't be back into our ordinary old life
It will be the land the lord our God promised us
A land flowing with milk and honey

OLD TESTAMENT: Deuteronomy 26: 1 - 11 (RCL)

(NRSV) When you have come into the land that the LORD your **God is giving you** as an inheritance to possess, and you possess it, and **settle in it**, 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. 3 You shall go to the priest who is in office at that time, and say to him, "Today I declare to the LORD your God that I have come into the land that the LORD swore to our ancestors to give us." 4 When the priest takes the basket from your hand and sets it down before the altar of the LORD your God, 5 you shall make this response before the LORD your God: "A wandering Arame'an was my ancestor; he went down into Egypt and lived there as an alien, few in number, and there he became a great nation, mighty and populous. 6 When the Egyptians treated us harshly and afflicted us, by imposing hard labor on us, 7 we cried to the LORD, the God of our ancestors; the LORD heard our voice and saw our affliction, our toil, and our oppression. 8 The LORD brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with a terrifying display of power, and with signs and wonders; 9 and he brought us into this place and gave us this land, a land **flowing with milk and honey**. 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 Le'vites 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.

PSALM 91: 1 - 2, 9 - 16 (RCL)

(NRSV) You who live in the shelter of the Most High,
who abide in the shadow of the Almighty,
2 will say to the LORD, "My refuge and my fortress;
my God, in whom I trust."

9 Because you have made the LORD your refuge,
the Most High your dwelling place,
10 no evil shall befall you,
no scourge come near your tent.
11 For he will command his angels concerning you

to guard you in all your ways.
12 On their hands they will bear you up,
so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.
13 You will tread on the lion and the adder,
the young lion and the serpent you will trample under foot.
14 Those who love me, I will deliver;
I will protect those who know my name.
15 When they call to me, I will answer them;
I will be with them in trouble,
I will rescue them and honor them.
16 With long life I will satisfy them,
and show them my salvation.

NEW TESTAMENT: Romans 10: 8b - 13 (RCL)

(NRSV) "The word is near you, on your lips and in your heart" (that is, the word of faith that we proclaim); 9 because if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. 10 For one believes with the heart and so is justified, and one confesses with the mouth and so is saved. 11 The scripture says, "No one who believes in him will be put to shame." 12 For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; the same Lord is Lord of all and is generous to all who call on him. 13 For, "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved."

GOSPEL: Luke 4: 1 - 13 (all)

(NRSV) 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.