

**Walk in the Wilderness**  
A Sermon by Louise Westfall  
Fairmount Presbyterian Church  
Cleveland Heights, Ohio  
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**Text: Luke 4:1-13**

It's been impossible to ignore the hype surrounding the Ash Wednesday release of Mel Gibson's movie, "The Passion of the Christ." I went to see it Friday night because I had weighed in publicly on some of the potential problems in such presentations: to its shame, the Christian Church historically has perpetrated great evil against Jewish persons and communities, depicting them as "Christ killers" responsible for slaying the son of God whom they rejected as messiah. I was also curious to understand the popularity of such a film--opening weekend sales have exceeded anything in recent memory--causing at least one radio commentator to predict that The Passion would ignite a return to church such has not been seen since 9/11. This isn't the place or time for a movie review, but I will say that it neither inspired nor sparked faith in me. Gratuitously violent, it focuses on the physical torture of the Roman penal system, and the suffering Jesus endured by the hands of civil and religious authorities rivaling characters in a Wes Craven slasher movie. The profound spiritual reality of the cross' redemptive meaning gets lost in a sea of blood.

The biblical text for this first Sunday of Lent serves as a minimalist corrective to such over-the-top theatrics. Here Jesus enters the wilderness and undergoes severe tempting. The landscape appears barren; he is alone with his thoughts and fears and dreams; he wrestles with the devil over attractive offerings: food, power, popularity, and comes away a changed man, one whose call is clear. Let us take a walk in the wilderness with Jesus, and hear God's Word from the gospel according to Luke in the fourth chapter at the first verse [Luke 4:1-13].

*Hi, my name is Vicki, and I'm an alcoholic.*

Not long ago I heard a presentation on the church's ministries for persons with addictions. One of the speakers began her remarks like that, and went on to explain that her recovery had come through participation in a "12-step" program. Vicki said the most difficult hurdle for her personally was the first step, to recognize who you are, and what your true condition is. Though she had to make that admission for herself, she was helped by the knowledge that other members of her group would support her, encourage her, and push her towards honesty. They wouldn't abandon her when she failed. Even though she hasn't had

a drop of alcohol for five years, she still calls herself “recovering.” *“It’s never over, never done,”* Vicki said. *“But every day of sobriety reminds me that I’m headed in the right direction.”*

The Christian season of Lent, some forty-days prior to Easter, functions similarly for Christians. It is a time for self-examination, taking an honest assessment of who we are. On Wednesday we were marked by ashes and reminded not so much that we are “bad to the bone,” but that these bones are mortal, impermanent, and in many ways, terribly fragile.

As we move towards the cross and Jesus’ death, we are made acutely aware of the brokenness of the world we inhabit. We remember Jesus’ suffering, and know that evil is present and active. We recall the hostility of the religious folk—and see clearly that even those who think they are right and righteous, are not. We read of the women who stood at the foot of the cross, weeping because they could do nothing to save Jesus, and we come face to face with the sense of powerlessness we often feel in the face of injustice and wrong-doing—the sense that “we can’t fix it.” We watch as Pilate, immediately after he has sentenced Jesus to die, call for water to “wash his hands” of responsibility, and think of how easily we turn away from situations that require courage and commitment. And like the women who came to the tomb to anoint their friend’s body, we too have mourned our dead. Lent presents us squarely with the reality we’d prefer to deny: we are not whole; the world is not whole; sin, pain, evil and death are present and powerful.

Lent begins in the wilderness, literally and metaphorically a place of isolation, hidden things—both dangerous and beautiful, and vulnerability. The text says Jesus was led there by the Holy Spirit; curiously enough until we remember how comfort and safety can anesthetize us to our true condition. Surrounded by familiar friends and possessions, immersed in our work and things, we can live for years without realizing that we are starving to death, spiritually. But the wilderness—that’s another story. In times of struggle and deprivation, stripped of the cushions with which we protect ourselves, here is where the stuff we’re made of is revealed. IN the wilderness there are no familiar landmarks from which to get our bearings. We must turn inward to find direction. We discover what anchors our life—or if we are simply adrift, without chart or compass. Wilderness experiences can be very lonely, times of confusion and stress. But without a doubt they clarify who we are and what we’re really about.

Jesus is led into the wilderness, immediately following his baptism in which he was named the Beloved Son of God. It’s a puzzling, scary story, with Jesus and the devil doing verbal battle, the devil quoting scripture

like a preacher (which just goes to show you, the people who toss off Bible verses aren't necessarily up to any good!). We sense that the stakes are high—will Jesus remain true to his identity, or get diverted into another path?

Three times Jesus is tempted, and three times he says no. Three times the Devil offers an attractive choice: food for his hunger, power to accomplish his mission, and spectacular attention by which to attract a following. Three times Jesus resists. Much has been made of these temptations by way of translating them into contemporary ones. What tempts you? And how do you overcome it?

I think all three temptations are different versions of the same thing, and exactly the same temptation that faces you and me every day: *to be someone other than who we are*. To try and play God. To imagine that we can control our destiny and the destiny of others, that we really are “superman” or “wonder woman.” Ironically, when we adopt that attitude, we fail at both—we become neither gods nor very good humans. When Jesus was content to remain human and let God alone be God, he revealed his identity as the Son of God, and showed us how we all were meant to be.

So we begin here with an acknowledgement of who we are—human begins, made in the image of God, named by God as God's beloved sons and daughters. Children who, like all children, rebel against our parents, rejecting their authority and claiming autonomy. The Christian word for it is “sin” and it describes a reality with consequences with which we are all too familiar.

*Hi, my name is Louise, and I'm a sinner.*

But, thank God, that is not the last word. In the wilderness, when we are tempted, when we sense our vulnerability, and fear that we will succumb, we see that we are not alone. Jesus is there too. Tempted by the Devil to claim god-like power and authority, Jesus chose to remain human. Tempted to grab control of his destiny, to go his own way, Jesus chose to live by God's word, to go God's way. Jesus understands our need, and helps us choose to do the same. It's never really over, never finished. But every day of choosing to go God's way, means we're headed in the right direction.

Because we cannot live by bread alone, we begin our Lenten journey here at the Lord's table, to be nourished with the bread of life and the cup of salvation. Here, too, we acknowledge our inability to save ourselves. The bread is broken; the cup poured out. The cross becomes a signpost in

the wilderness, pointing the way out, the way home. We gather with one another, sinners all, yet beloved children of God. We support each other, encourage each other, lovingly push each other towards honesty, just as we are supported and encouraged and pushed by the Son of God. And we will not abandon one another, just as God in Christ has never abandoned us, but comes to us, and stays with us always and forever.

Friends, let us walk in the wilderness, and find vision, strength, and mercy there to accomplish the purpose to which we have been called.

TO JESUS CHRIST WHO LOVES US AND FREED US FROM OUR SINS AND MADE US PART OF GOD'S HOLY KINGDOM, BE GLORY AND POWER FOREVER. AMEN.

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