

### **The First Reading is from Luke 4:1-13**

<sup>1</sup>Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, <sup>2</sup>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. <sup>3</sup>The devil said to him,

“If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread.”

<sup>4</sup>Jesus answered him,

“It is written, ‘One does not live by bread alone.’”

<sup>5</sup>Then the devil led him up and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. <sup>6</sup>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. <sup>7</sup>If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours.”

<sup>8</sup>Jesus answered him, “It is written,

‘Worship the Lord your God,  
and serve only him.’”

<sup>9</sup>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, <sup>10</sup>for it is written,

‘He will command his angels concerning you,  
to protect you,’<sup>11</sup> and

‘On their hands they will bear you up,  
so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.’”

<sup>12</sup>Jesus answered him,

“It is said, ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’”

<sup>13</sup>When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time.

### **The Second Reading is from Psalm 25:1, 4-5**

<sup>1</sup>To you, O LORD, I lift up my soul.

<sup>4</sup>Make me to know your ways, O LORD;  
teach me your paths.

<sup>5</sup>Lead me in your truth, and teach me,  
for you are the God of my salvation;  
for you I wait all day long.

### The Third Reading is from

<sup>1</sup> Moses was keeping the flock of his father-in-law Jethro, the priest of Midian; ***he led his flock beyond the wilderness, and came to Horeb, the mountain of God.*** <sup>2</sup> There the angel of the LORD appeared to him in a flame of fire out of a bush; he looked, and the bush was blazing, yet it was not consumed. <sup>3</sup> Then Moses said, "I must turn aside and look at this great sight, and see why the bush is not burned up." <sup>4</sup> When the LORD saw that he had turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush, "Moses, Moses!" And he said, "Here I am." <sup>5</sup> Then God said, "Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground." <sup>6</sup> God said further, "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God.

<sup>7</sup> Then the LORD said, ***"I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians,*** and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey, to the country of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites. <sup>9</sup> ***The cry of the Israelites has now come to me; I have also seen how the Egyptians oppress them.*** <sup>10</sup> ***So come, I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt.***" <sup>11</sup> But Moses said to God, "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?" <sup>12</sup> God said, "I will be with you; and this shall be the sign for you that it is I who sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall worship God on this mountain."

### The Message is entitled, ***"Wilderness Sojourn"***

The most desolate wilderness landscape I saw during my pilgrimage to Israel was the stark landscape of the hills from Jerusalem to Jericho. The hills were baked dry and vegetation was imperceptible. The heat rose off the arid hills as I wondered how the Bedouin herders found food for their livestock let alone for themselves, as I noticed their makeshift dwellings that were visible along the route we traveled.

I have seen other wilderness landscapes, like my drive to Mammoth on Highway 395 or my drive to the Colorado River on Interstate 40, but at least in these wilderness places there is scrub brush and often plenty of it. But on the arid bald hills between Jerusalem and Jericho there appeared to be nothing, just desolate dirt and sand. Now the route from Jerusalem to Jericho, as a bird flies, is only 18

miles. So, I can't begin to image the expanse of land walked by our ancestors in faith through the Sinai Peninsula as they escaped the oppressive grasp of Egypt's Pharaoh. Nor can I imagine being in any wilderness, with scrub brush or not, without food for forty days like Jesus.

Bruce Feiler, the author of *Walking the Bible*, writes this of the desert, of the wilderness places found in the first five books of the bible: "The first thing you notice about the desert is the light. It's a white light, bleached across the horizon, that bounces the blue helmet of the sky, picks up the glint of quartz in the sand, and washes out everything in its sight... The second thing you notice about the desert is the space. The panorama is overwhelming, with sand blowing across the ground, bushes bent against the wind, and everywhere rocks, mesa, dunes, and mountains... The last thing you notice about the desert is the noise... I was amazed by the din – the wind whining through the mountains, the sand tinkling against your face, rocks crunching beneath your feet... The desert may be empty, but it's the least quiet place I've ever been."

Feiler says this about the wilderness escape route from Egypt, "The Sinai, compels a certain clarity [for] I understood even more the importance of the Sinai to the Bible, to the need of the Israelites to shed the skins of other cultures and start growing one of their own. The desert destroys affection; it demands authenticity."

The wilderness into which we will sojourn this Lent will demand authenticity from us. It will require us to reflect deeply on our own lives, as individuals and as a church. It will help us bring clarity, shedding the skins of our pretenses and growing authentically into whom God has created us to be. As you can see, I have brought a bit of the wilderness into our sanctuary with the help of Carol and Jim Appleton; a bit of wilderness to help us visualize the journey before us as we sojourn through the Sinai wilderness with our ancestors of faith. You'll notice that even our wilderness is not a welcoming place, for it is a prickly place with no immediate source of water. We will have to use our imaginations to visualize the overwhelming panorama of wilderness experienced by the Israelites. Yet, even though our wilderness, the Sinai wilderness, and the wilderness of Jesus' temptations were unwelcoming, let us trust that we will not sojourn alone. Let us remember that even in the wilderness, God is with us.

"Moses was keeping the flock of his father-in-law Jethro, the priest of Midian; [and] *he led his flock beyond the wilderness, and came to Horeb, the mountain of God.*" Moses was actually accustomed to the wilderness, for he fled across the Sinai wilderness, settling in the land of Midian after killing an Egyptian.

Like the modern-day Bedouin herders Moses led his father-in-law's flocks through the wilderness. In our text, it says that Moses came to Horeb, which was known as the mountain of God. It was here that Moses had an encounter with God, for Moses saw a bush ablaze with fire, but the bush was not being consumed.

Moses noticed something. Moses then stopped to look at what he noticed. Moses' action is part of who I am given the years of contemplative retreats that I have attended, for a spiritual director said to me many years ago, "Notice what you notice." Notice and then explore why you noticed she said. Or as Frederick Buechner puts it, "Listen to your life. See it for the fathomless mystery it is...touch, taste, smell your way to the holy and hidden heart of it because in the last analysis all moments are key moments."

Listen to your life as Moses did, for in the ordinary task of keeping his father-in-law's flock, Moses experienced a key moment. Yet, would he notice? Would God get his attention? Would God's presence be palpable and plain in the burning bush that was not consumed? Moses noticed and Moses stopped. Moses pondered the sight, wondered how could this be, and questions surfaced in his heart about what he was noticing in the midst of his everyday life.

This is when God called to him out of the bush. God called Moses to remove his shoes, his dusty sandals that had protected his feet as he herded the flock. Removing shoes was a sign of respect in Moses' culture; it was also a practice in one's own home. Moses, was a man who was never really at home though – a Hebrew baby placed in a basket in the Nile reeds in hopes of sparing his life; a Hebrew boy raised in the foreign splendor of Egypt's Pharaoh palace, by Pharaoh's daughter; a Hebrew man who saw the oppression of his people and murdered an Egyptian, fleeing to Midian. Could it be that Moses, in removing his shoes, finally felt at home? At home in the presence of the God of his father, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob?

Where are you most at home? Where are we most at home as a church? Are we at home in the presence of God?

God spoke to Moses saying, "I've taken a good, long look at the affliction of my people in Egypt. I've heard their cries for deliverance from their slave masters; I know all about their pain. And now I have come down to help them, pry them loose from the grip of Egypt, get them out of that country and bring them to a good land with wide-open spaces, a land lush with milk and honey."

God has heard the people's cry and Moses is being asked by God to lead God's people out of Egypt. This is a big ask, as you might remember that Moses fled from Egypt to preserve his life. So, although Moses noticed what he noticed and

pondered what it could mean, Moses wasn't ready to hear God's invitation. Moses instead voiced his concern saying, "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh?"

I always find this part of the story a bit comforting, given that our first response to God is often, "No thanks," as well. We find all sorts of excuses why God should choose somebody else, especially if the ask is big, like it was of Moses. God is quick to respond to Moses concern promising, "I will be with you." This is the theme of the Presbyterian Women's Bible Study this year, for throughout scripture God says repeatedly to the people of God and to us, "I will be with you." Even so, we hesitate, we make excuses, we fear trusting in God's promise saying, "No thanks, pick someone else."

But, friends, God is persistent. I know this to be true in my own life. I know this to be true in the lives of those I have walked with. God doesn't give up. God pursues us, while also promising to be with us. God also promises to equip us for the task to which we are called like he did for Moses: "I will be with your mouth and teach you what you are to speak."

Throughout scripture, God calls and equips his people from Moses to Esther, from Mary to Peter, from Paul to Lydia. And God still calls. Yet, we like Moses make excuses. Teresa of Avila, from the 16<sup>th</sup> century has a sober reminder for us Christ followers though, for she wrote, "Christ has no body now but yours. No hands, no feet on earth but yours. Yours are the eyes through which Christ looks with compassion on this world. Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good. Yours are the hands through which Christ blesses all the world. Yours are the hands, yours are the feet, yours are the eyes, you are Christ's body. Christ has no body now on earth but yours." Throughout our ongoing story of faith, God calls us to participate.

"God uses this Exodus story to draw men and women, like you and me, from the mess of history into the kingdom of salvation," writes Eugene Peterson. He continues saying, "It is significant that God does not present us with salvation (that is, deliverance from all that oppresses us or separates us from God) in the form of an abstract truth, or a precise definition or a catchy slogan, but as a story."

The people who cried out in Egypt were called to be part of God's story. Moses was called to be part of God's story. Yet, the story that unfolds in the Book of Exodus isn't just ancient biblical history; it is our story, as well. The wilderness sojourn Moses will lead the Israelites on has the ability to speak into our lives today, just as it did on Thursday morning during Sunrise.

Yet, are we willing to notice what we notice, trusting that God will speak to us as we make this wilderness sojourn? Are we willing to take off our shoes and to be at home in God's presence?

You might recall that Bruce Feiler wrote, “The [wilderness] may be empty, but it’s the least quiet place I’ve ever been.” The noise of our lives may very well dull our senses such that we don’t notice God trying to get our attention. We may even have missed a burning bush or two or three in our own lives as well as in the life of this church. But, friends, God is persistent. God is beckoning each one of us into the wilderness, where we will have to rely on God’s promise of presence and provision in order to make it to the land lush with milk and honey.

As we begin our sojourn through the wilderness, let us remember that God is with us. Let us dare to notice what we notice, stopping, listening, and responding to how God is calling us as partners in the work of deliverance. May this wilderness sojourn bring us clarity, as we authentically become who God has created us to be. Amen.