
WAITING ON ANGELS
MATTHEW 4:1-11
A SERMON PREACHED AT DUKE UNIVERSITY CHAPEL
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No one wants to go into a wilderness. No one in their right mind would actually choose this for their loved ones or their own life. But guess what? If you're a Christian, you will go to a wilderness one day and most likely it will last more than a day but could be as long as forty days and forty nights like Jesus or even forty years like the children of Israel. You might even be there right now. You—not an “almost Christian” as John Wesley would say, but a real Christian, a devout one, a faithful servant of the Lord. You pray and engage other spiritual practices. You study the Bible and give alms and even love your neighbors but still wind up in a desert, a wilderness. And what's even more mysterious, or perhaps disturbing, is that the same Spirit who descended on you like a dove at your baptism is the same Spirit that led you into a wilderness.

Spiritual people end up in a wilderness. You can't skip over it and go straight from your baptism to public ministry. You, like Jesus, have to go *through* the wilderness. It's a gateway to the pilgrimage with God. Baptism to the wilderness to ministry and life with God. We can't avoid the hard stuff of life. That's not the Christian way. How could it be when we are marked by a cross? There are wounds and wildernesses in our journey with God. Struggle, challenge, and temptation are aspects of the spiritual life that are not to be ignored or avoided.

But the wilderness is a strange place, a weird womb for future work and wonder. There can be lots of anxiety and uncertainty there. And this is understandable when things don't make sense or just don't add up. What doesn't add up is when a devil, evil, can quote scripture better than your pastor! Now this is a real church scandal. When the devil tempts Jesus by quoting scripture, it reveals that people can use sacred texts for unholy acts. Just because you can quote John 3:16 doesn't mean you love Jesus. Just because you can name all of the 66 books of the Bible doesn't mean you know Jesus. There are people who use scripture—the holy writ—to hurt others and to diminish their humanity. There are people who use scripture to promote nationalistic domination in the name of God. The wilderness reveals that evil knows how to quote the Bible!

Quoting the written word but not following the incarnate Word. Saying the right words but with wrong intentions. There is a temptation to believe that because someone quotes scripture that they are for me and not against me. The devil in the wilderness shows us otherwise and it's a reminder of what the Rev. Howard Thurman said in his 1965 book, *The Luminous Darkness*: “because a person is a Christian is no indication what his attitude may be toward me in any given circumstance.” The Bible can be and has been used as a tool to beat and bludgeon other people. The devil quoting scripture in the same way Jesus does can get people confused. The wilderness is such a strange, perplexing place.

But spiritual people, faithful people, end up in a wilderness to face their demons and temptations and encounter evil head on. In his book, *Temptation*, Diogenes Allen names the three temptations Jesus faces: “the temptation of material goods” “the temptation of security” and “the temptation of prestige.” In the first, Jesus is faced with physical hunger and the appetite to be self-sufficient rather than reliant on God. In the second, Jesus is faced with the idol of security and the impulse to challenge God's fidelity. In the third, Jesus is faced with the desire for human prestige and control and the urge to worship something or someone other than God. Each temptation challenges Jesus to turn away from trust in God and avoid mystery, uncertainty and doubt. But Jesus does not turn away from God and even though the devil challenges him with “if”—“if you are the Son of God”—Jesus does not cave in but stands in courage because he “knows *who* he is...by remembering *whose* he is” (David Lose).

Jesus embraced his identity as the Son of God in the same way we can claim our identity as children of God even if wilderness temptations challenge who we are. Tough times can embolden us to remember whose we are. We may not like or enjoy our circumstances, but we aren't the first ones ever to wander in a wilderness. We are reminded of this when Jesus quotes scripture from Old Testament passages out of Deuteronomy, referencing Israel's time in the wilderness. What Jesus says connects us to our spiritual ancestors. We are tied together over time, over centuries, in our

common experience of a wilderness and temptation. We all have to endure it at some point in life. But we aren't the first to deal with this and we won't be the last.

Jesus's wandering and struggle echoes the children of Israel and just as they emerged through it, so will he and so will we. But I know, right now, in Lent, four minutes or four days or forty nights or forty years can feel like an eternity when dealing with temptation, and unlike wine, it doesn't necessarily get better with age.

I know that the weary wilderness can be full of worry. We wander and wonder if it will ever end or where is God or where is grace or where is hope? It's easy to think that the Genesis story of Adam and Eve's fall from grace encapsulates the totality of our life with God where there are only falls and temptations. In the wilderness, it's easy to think this way when you're famished and fearful at the unknown as the devil plays scriptural prooftext with your mind. It's a strange spiritual place to exist—the wilderness.

Struggling with your past contributions and sense of worth and impact and questioning what you've done with your life while wrestling with a devil that tells you to jump off a building because no one cares—that is, tempted to believe your life has no significance. A wilderness. Or, wrestling with a partner who emotionally and physically abuses you and one day although you wake up breathing, you recognize that you died a long time ago—that is, tempted to remain in abuse because you think you can save that person. A wilderness. Or, grappling with disappointments when your future plans don't appear to be what God has in mind and you're left with no apparent options and a lack of direction—that is, tempted to think you control your own future. A wilderness.

I've been in that one. In the Spring 2000, I was 26 years old and had graduated from seminary a year before. I was engaged to be married already and spent most of my engagement overseas in France; you can imagine that went over well with my fiancée and soon-to-be-wife, Gail. I was spending two weeks at the Taizé Community in France on a postgraduate fellowship. And it was there where I wrestled with an unknown future. Had no job. Did not know what was next. Was going to get married but had no money and no house and at the time, no car. But I still thought I was a great catch! Professional doors were closing, and I became more stressed out about next steps. I had no clue and was lost in a wilderness. It seemed as if the only thing I had was trust in God and I was losing that.

The wilderness is a weird womb for our spiritual future. Often, we don't know how to make sense of all the muddiness and madness and convolution—the geopolitical struggles, the climate change debates, the terror of ethnic, theological, and political tribalism, evil quoting scripture. What kind of wacky world is this? Is there any hope here in what feels like hell? Is there a light at the end of the tunnel of 40 days and 40 nights? Is there a way out of the wilderness? Is there a way *in* the wilderness?

There is one small sign of grace, one little linguistic signpost standing upright *in* the wide wilderness. You could easily miss it. But this is what it says, "and suddenly angels came and waited on him." You might have missed this sign amid the cesspool of your circumstances. After all, you're famished. You're wiped out. You're tired of all of the temptations coming your way. You've been wrestling with evil for a long time. You can't think straight or see straight. But that seemingly 'throw away' line is your lifeline, is your hope, is your deepest desire, your water in the wilderness—"and suddenly angels came and waited on him."

While I struggled with my unknown future back at Taizé, on my final day there, unbeknownst to me, the brother who was my spiritual director for my week of silence, asked Bro. Roger, the founder and leader of the community, whether I could be their honored guest at lunch with the brothers. He agreed and there I was in my sweatpants and athletics shirt at the middle of a long rectangle table with at least 50 Taizé brothers. Bro. Roger had just returned from meeting with Pope John Paul II. When he sat further down the table from me, they had a small bouquet of flowers in front of him. But Bro. Roger told them to send the flowers down to me because I was their honored guest. I was a wandering lost anxious soul in a wilderness, not knowing what was next with doors being closed but then Bro. Roger opened the door to me to welcome me to the table for the breaking of bread. It was as if God was saying, 'Don't worry, Luke, I'll welcome you and I have your future.' "And suddenly angels came and waited on him."

I mourn for those who miss this little grace, this little flower, this little angel of light. I mourn with those who feel trapped in a wilderness as if "hope unborn had died," as the hymn says. I mourn for those who never made it out of

the wilderness into the fullness of joy and ministry and influence. I mourn for those who end their life by saying, ‘the devil made me do it.’ It doesn’t have to be that way even in a wild wilderness.

There is worry of course but also wonder as we wander. After all you’ve been through and will go through, after all the battles of mind and body and spirit, the ups and downs, sometimes even wanting to throw yourself off a peak, howling for hope, desperate for deliverance, crying silently, walking aimlessly, waiting for the parting of the seas, waiting for a light, there is an angel, a messenger from God, waiting on you, which means serving you, ministering to you, waiting on you as at a Taizé table. You think you’ve been waiting but the angels are waiting.

The verb ‘wait’ comes from a word linked to the word ‘diaconate’ from where we get the word ‘deacon.’ There are demon deacons at Wake Forest University but there are angel deacons in the wilderness, serving you at a table of grace after all the wrestling and struggle you’ve endured. We need their diaconate ministry. We need the strength and bread of angels on our journey, especially when we’re tired.

An angel tells Joseph not to be afraid when they hear that Mary will give birth to Jesus and to take her as his wife. An angel tells Joseph to flee to Egypt since Herod was looking for the child to kill him. An angel then tells Joseph to leave Egypt and go to the land of Israel after Herod dies. At critical transitional moments, right when we need them, the deacons of God, angels, show up.

Don’t miss the angel of God in your life. We don’t have to escape the limitations of a wilderness to experience the limitless grace of God right when we need it. “And suddenly angels came...” That little signpost of grace is so small that it can be missed amid the overwhelming abundance of temptations and human struggle. As pastor J. Alfred Smith once preached, “Hope is a tiny sprout growing in cracked concrete.” Hope is so tiny—like a throw away phrase in the gospel of Matthew—that you can miss it—miss the light, the balm, the grace, the flower blooming, the angel.

I know how easy it is to focus on all the trouble—the negativity—in our world or life and neglect the grace. But remember that there were three temptations, and that number has biblical significance and is very trinitarian, if I must say. Three. There were three Hebrew boys thrown in a fiery furnace and who were not burned. Three. Three times the apostle Paul asked God to remove his thorn in the flesh and God didn’t, but he learned that God’s grace was sufficient for him and that whenever he was weak, he was strong. Three. Jesus was crucified on a Friday, but when he counted to three, on a third day, early in the morning, he was raised. Three. Underneath the turmoil of the wilderness, there is a hint of eventual triumph.

In the wilderness wandering, there is wonder, there is hope, there is grace, even if it’s a small bouquet of flowers.

Don’t be afraid of the wilderness this Lent. Embrace it. The angels are waiting.