

“On Our Lips and In Our Hearts”  
Rev. Dr. Leah Fowler  
Presbyterian Church in Leonia  
First Sunday of Lent, March 6, 2022

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Romans 10:8b-13  
Luke 4:1-13

When I was a child, from ages 4-6, my dad and stepmom lived for a couple of years in an intentional community of people who practiced meditation. They occupied an old, crumbly mansion in the Buckhead neighborhood of Atlanta. When my sister and I would visit, we would look for secret passageways as we quietly tiptoed through the hallways, careful not to disturb anyone meditating as we pursued our adventures. When meditation sessions were over, though, we would delight in the attentions of our dad and stepmom. The meditation center stood next to a forest— this was so long ago; today Georgia State Route 400, an 8-lane expressway runs right through that land where trees once stood.

Partly because they lived in a one-room apartment that felt too small with active, curious girls, but also to reward my sister and me for being quiet while our dad and stepmom meditated for what seemed like an eternity but was probably about 45 minutes, sometimes they would take us on a walk through the forest, to a shopping area that had an arcade and a Haagen Dazs ice cream shop. This was a great treat during daylight hours! But in the winter months, when darkness fell early, I was terrified to step foot in those woods. The shadows lengthened. Trees that in daylight seemed pleasant or simply ordinary, at night time appeared menacing; I imagined them with angry, scowling faces and branches that could grab me. I would engage my father in questions about the existence of monsters. He told me that I needed to trust the night. I would try every argument I could to beg them not to take me through those woods; when words failed, I flailed, falling to the ground in a tantrum, insisting that it would be better to die of boredom in the meditation center than to die at the hands of the monsters of the dark. They say I was a dramatic child...

That first step into the forest was always the hardest. I probably had to be carried in— I remember my dad would hoist me up onto his shoulders, which was such a treat— especially as I got older and shoulder rides became rarer— that I would forget my tantrum. Eventually my dad would say I was getting too heavy to carry, or complain that I kept holding my hands over his eyes, and he would put me down. Hand in hand, we would make it along the path, one foot in front of the other, until neon lights spilled onto the trail. We'd cross the parking lot, and then all my fears of the forest were left behind once we entered the shopping center, bustling with people and light and activity and Ms Pac-Man. The walk back to the meditation center was never quite so bad, because it was sweetened with the honey vanilla ice-cream cone I carried, which took mindful concentration not to topple the ball of creamy sweetness off its cone.

For 40 days and 40 nights Jesus— led by the Holy Spirit— found himself in the wilderness: a place of fear; a place of vulnerability; a place of uncertainty. As for Hebrews many generations

back, who had to spend 40 years in the wilderness before they could enter a land of their freedom and shape it into something that provided their milk and honey, the wilderness was a place that would shape Jesus and prepare him for who he was becoming and what would be asked of him.

The gospels report that Jesus was tempted by the devil. Who is this devil whom Jesus meets? The Greek calls him the "*diabolou*" which means "adversary." I have always been cautious speaking of The Devil as an outside force— first of all, in a monotheistic religion we need to be careful about making a god out of the devil; we need not give the devil more power than the devil deserves. I also have seen people rely upon the devil as an excuse for their own misbehavior: "The devil made me do it" as a way of relieving themselves of any kind of responsibility or accountability. And finally, too often people have been miscast as being possessed by the devil when really the only thing that possessed them was a difference about them that others feared or didn't understand. For generations in this country and others, too, women and girls, and fewer men and boys, burned at the stake over these kinds of fears.

The devil very much could have been a voice within Jesus himself. The fact that the devil in this passage quotes from the scriptures makes this possibility compelling to me. How could these words be so familiar on his lips if they weren't also in his heart? And, haven't we all allowed ourselves to become our own worst enemy in moments of deep personal struggle?

Still, as much as we can harness our self-doubt, our anxieties, and our fears into something that looks or sounds like the devil, there are also very real, outside evils that wheedle into our societies and psyches and seek to put a stop to the blossoming of goodness. Sometimes, we can put a name or a face to it, and sometimes they can't even be explained.

Here is one thing I do know: even God's beloved sometimes ends up in the wilderness. Just before this wilderness scene happens in the gospel, Luke tells of Jesus' baptism in the Jordan by John the Baptist. As Jesus emerged from the waters, the heavens parted and a voice came down from heaven, saying, "You are my Son, the Beloved, with you I am well pleased."

The Devil's message to the very hungry Jesus, who had been on a 40-day fast, was that if God is so pleased with you, and you are so beloved to God, then surely you are entitled to some bread. There are some stones over there; why not help yourself?

Instead, Jesus chose to know the contours of his hunger. He realized he was more than what he lacked. Because he knew what it meant to be hungry, he was able to say later in his sermons, "Blessed are you who hunger now, for you will be filled." If he had not first experienced raw, desperate hunger, those words would have been empty.

Christian blogger Debie Thomas wrote that Jesus "has to trust that he can be beloved and famished, valued and vulnerable at the same time. He has to learn that God's care resides within his flesh-and-blood humanity — within a fragile vessel that can crack and shatter. To be

beloved is not to transcend the other, grimmer truth, the truth of dust and ashes. We will die.” (“In the Barren Places” by Debie Thomas, *Journey with Jesus* for Sunday, March 6, 2022).

Can you imagine, if Jesus took the devil up on the temptation to cast himself off the pinnacle of the Temple, only to rely on the protection of angels, as scripture promised and the devil lured? But then he would be giving up what it means to be human, and what it means to die. If you worshiped with us on Wednesday, you received the sign of ashes: *from dust you were made, and to dust you shall return*. In the wilderness, Jesus experienced what it means to be dust. He did not opt out; instead, he continued the journey to the cross, so that we— who already know, on some level, what it means to die— could experience resurrection.

That is what power *with*, rather than power *over* means. By a wave of his hand, the devil could have given Jesus all the kingdoms of the world, to worship Jesus. Or so he said. But Jesus did not want the peoples’ submission. He wanted their *love*. And he wanted to show them the love of God, and how to share that with one another.

And so, Jesus completed his 40 days in the wilderness, and I suspect he was a changed man. He was able to take in people’s fear, their hunger, their vulnerability, their uncertainty, and transform it into something that could connect them to God and God’s love. He could do that, because he had been shaken by each of those human emotions himself.

As it turns out, I changed, to **love** taking nighttime walks through the woods. With night as a blanket, creation weaves me in and reminds me that I am part of its tapestry. What delight it is to be among the crickets and the frogs composing songs about life that only come out in the darkness. It makes me wonder what I might do with my one wild and precious life.

But there are other wilderness experiences I find myself in that are much harder to approach with a sense of wonder and peace. Instead, they call out my fears. They expose me. What wilderness do *you* know right now? Join me, join Jesus, as we explore these places and allow the wilderness to be our teacher, that in our emptiness, we are embraced. In our vulnerability, we are valued. In our humanity, we are held.