

Full to the Brim: Even in the Desert

First Sunday in Lent

Luke 4:1-13 Deuteronomy 26:1-11
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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Welcome to the season of Lent, that 40-day period of time, not counting Sundays, when Christians who following the liturgical church calendar prepare to celebrate the mystery that is Easter. Based on the resource material that I will be using as a guide, the focus during Lent will be a bit different this year – a bit more uplifting. From an organization called A Sanctified Art, formed by a handful of brilliantly creative Presbyterian women, the overall theme is entitled, “**Full to the Brim: An Expansive Lent.**”

Historically and traditionally, Lent is approached as a time of self-denial, self-sacrifice, and hardcore repentance, both as individuals and as the church. Yes, as I have shared basically every year on the First Sunday of Lent, **perhaps it's more advantageous to approach Lent less as a time to think about what to give up, and more about what to take on. As in, whatever that is that helps you to draw closer to the experience of God's Sacred Presence with and within you.**

Part of the purpose point of Lent, as well as today's Gospel reading from Luke, the story of Jesus being tempted in the wilderness, is to **heighten our awareness of, our attachment to, and our dependence on things other than God.** That's why “Full to the Brim: An Expansive Lent” will approach Lent as a time to **reflect upon God's expansive unearned grace – even in and through tumultuous times.** For let's be honest, can you really think of a time in history that hasn't had its share of tumultuousness? Maybe part of living life to the fullest involves acknowledging **we are never completely free from wilderness and desert experiences.** That may help us to remember that God is always with us.

A few moments ago we heard the story, as told in the Gospel of Luke, of **Jesus' 40-day journey through the wilderness.** Here's part of the twist, however. It's an approach to biblical interpretation commonly used by progressives. Instead of seeing this simply as a story that happened once upon a time a long, long time ago in a land far, far away, we can also see it as **something that continues to happen, to each of us, to this very day.** This is often referred to as a pilgrimage or journey through the wilderness, a desert experience in our own lives.

In the Bible, the wilderness is nearly always a place, literally or metaphorically, of struggle and of being tested. Think of Moses and the Israelites wandering for 40 years in the desert before entering the promised land, flowing with milk and honey. In the midst of their journey, they do not always believe that they will make it out the other side. They even think it might be better to return to their lives of slavery in Egypt than to keep moving toward freedom. They were tempted to set aside their dependance on God and God's grace and provision. At times, we experience something very similar in our own lives.

The wilderness, then, becomes a place where Jesus' (and our) core commitments, priorities, trust, and loyalties will be tested. How can we, then, like Jesus,

experience God's expansive grace even in the desert? I think that both begins and ends by remembering that we are never alone, that God is always with us, even in the desert experiences in our lives. Remember, immediately after Jesus' baptism, when he is filled with the Spirit of God, that same Spirit leads him out into the wilderness. Therefore, even when we have felt, or currently feel abandoned and alone, God's Sacred Presence is with us.

I would suspect that for many of you personally, and certainly us together as a community of faith, the past few years have felt like being stuck in the desert – in a constant time of trial, a perpetual Lent, so to speak. We are still in the desert of a continuing pandemic. And now, the desert of an unjustified war and humanitarian crisis in Ukraine, spilling over into Eastern Europe, and its consequences reaching our very shores, and wallets.

The season of Lent implores us to look back and reflect upon how God was present, and currently is, in and through all those desert experiences of scarcity, trial, and feeling alone? Question: Where and how were you able to experience God's expansive grace during those times in your life? My mind, and I'm sure yours, continues to return to **the war in Ukraine** and the horrendous wilderness experience they are facing at this very moment. While I don't know the answers, and often they only come when looking back in retrospect, I wonder how they are able to experience God's expansive grace in the midst of such unconscionable inhumanity, displacement of families, disruption of life, and blatant war crimes. Part of that grace is coming through the gracious actions of neighboring countries taking in refugees, others suppling basic daily needs, and our own ability to take action through the Presbyterian Disaster Assistance efforts, among others.

While we dwell on that, let's go back and take a quick look at the wilderness, the desert, where Jesus' (and our) core commitments, priorities, trust, and loyalties will be tested. In the **first confrontation**, the devil – or, the 'tempter' or 'tester' – attempts to mislead Jesus into using his own power for himself by turning stones into bread, rather than trusting God to satisfy his needs. A common way of interpreting Jesus' temptation is to cast him as a kind of hero. In this case, by resisting the **lures to comfort** (*You're hungry – so go ahead and eat!*) **Jesus will not misuse his power for personal material gain.**

- **Question:** How often do you and I want that which is comfortable, and the power to make things as we wish them to be, to turn stones to bread, turn this to that, to have the world as we desire, not as it is?

The **second temptation** attempts to seduce Jesus with domination and prestige, if he were given all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor. This involves resisting the **lures to glory** (*All this can be yours!*) **Jesus will not misuse his power to amass personal clout and esteem.**

- **Question:** How often do you and I want to manage what others think of us, to have authority, status, prestige, privilege, and to receive the glory for ourselves?

The **third test** focuses on Jesus' vulnerability and need for safety, were he to jump off the pinnacle of the temple. This involves resisting the **lures for security** (*Prove you're God's beloved, let God rescue you!*) **Jesus will not misuse his power to make himself safe and secure.**

- **Question:** How often do you and I want the security of freedom from pain, from risk, from sacrifice, as if we could leap from a tall height and not be hurt?

Through this biblical story, we are called to put our trust in God as our provider and sustainer, as our belonging, and as our security. Abundance, in all its many forms, can be misinterpreted as merely the results of our own efforts rather than as a gracious gift of God. Jesus, in his relationship with God, relied not on himself and his own power but on God for sustenance, for guidance, and for lovingkindness. Again, we are called to do the same in **relying on God, not on our own fortitude and self-sufficiency.** Yet, perhaps the most fundamental of all temptations are these:

- Is God really with us?
- Is God's grace really expansive in our lives?
- Does God really love us – does God love me – or not?

Jesus' responses declare the good news: **Yes – God loves you, and loves us all! God is the One we are made to trust – with humility and grace – for nourishment, guidance, and care.** For even as we travel through the wilderness, the desert, every good gift in our lives should be considered manna from heaven, our “daily bread” for which we can and should give thanks and be deeply grateful.

This, along with what we learn from the Old Testament reading from Deuteronomy 8, also calls us to the fact that **our blessings are not “ours” to hoard, but rather God's to give and “ours” to receive and share with others.** If only we loosened our grip enough to help build a society where all may share such good gifts. As the SALT commentary concludes, “Indeed, since we are made in the image of a graceful, generous God, we embody that image more gracefully the more generously we treat our neighbors, and the more creatively we construct a world in which not just bread but also every form of “milk and honey” is enjoyed as widely and equitably as possible.”

There is evidence of this happening, even amidst the unspeakable atrocities in Ukraine and with their refugees. There is evidence of this in and through our outreach and ministry efforts. May there be more evidence of this in our own neighborhoods, cities, and beyond.

Yes, it is God who fills us to the brim – even in the desert.

Amen.

Resources:

“Full to the Brim: Even in the Desert”, A Sanctified Art Sermon Planning Guide.

“The Hidden Fountain: SALT's Lectionary Commentary for Lent 1, 2-28-22/

Steve Garnaas-Holmes, *Temptation*, www.unfoldinglight.net, 3-7-19.

Dr. Gregory Popcak and Rachael Popcak, *How To Make the Most Out of Lent*, www.patheos.com, 3-5-19.

Phil Fox Rose, *What Are You Giving Up for Lent?* www.patheos.com, 2-7-13.