

## **“SACRED PLACES, SACRED CONVERSATIONS: WILDERNESS”**

Matthew 3:1-6; 4:1-11

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Wilderness has always been an important place for God’s people. Moses was called to free the people in Egypt when God appeared to him through a burning bush in the wilderness. When the people of Israel set out from Egypt, miraculously crossing the Red Sea as they fled from Pharaoh’s army, they entered the wilderness. There, they met their God at Sinai, and were given the law that would shape their faith and their life together down to the present day. They wandered the wilderness for forty years where they complained about the hardship of hunger and thirst, and strayed from their God while Moses was absent. But the wilderness was also a place of nurture and growth. They dined on manna, food from heaven. They learned to lean on God. When the prophet Elijah’s life was threatened, he fled to the wilderness where God provided for his needs, and where God called him out of hiding with that “still small voice.” And in the wilderness, John calls the people to repentance and to prepare for the coming of the Lord.

Wilderness was for Israel a dry, unfriendly place, and yet it is there that they learned of God’s providing, and it is there that they return for renewing their faith. In the wilderness, Jesus has a sacred conversation with a surprising figure that tells us some important things about his mission.

But before I talk about that conversation, I want to make us aware of the importance of wilderness in our own day. It is for many of us a sacred place, a place where we, too, encounter God. Although for the most part, these encounters are with a domesticated wilderness: a walk through the woods, kayaking on a river or lake, a visit to a national park. When I think of wilderness, I think of the interior of Iceland, a panorama of extensive landscape filled with lava flows from centuries ago and glaciers whose mass is shrinking quickly. I think of the journals of John Muir from his time in the Sierras and photographs by Ansel Adams that brought Yosemite to life. There are the Redwood forests of northern California, the Alaskan wilderness, the deserts of the southwest, and the rain forests of the Amazon.

These wild places, where the roads are few and rough, the power-lines non-existent, and the evidence of a human presence minimal, are essential to the health of the planet. And they are shrinking at an alarming rate because we are still about conquering the wilderness in order to make it suitable for human habitation and consumption.

This month Jonathon Foer will be coming to Kalamazoo to encourage us to reduce our consumption of meat because it is a major contributor to climate change. Now I don’t know why there are still “climate deniers,” but if I had to guess, I’d have to say that there are still people who are willing to sacrifice the health of the earth (or some small part of the earth) for personal comfort and profit. I’ll say a little more about that when I get to the sacred conversation.

But here's the reality we're dealing with today. The pollutants in the air that threaten human health in many cities around the world are mostly the result of human activity that was designed to make our lives easier and more comfortable. The world is continuing to pump pollutants into the air at a faster rate than the earth can cleanse it. It doesn't matter whether you call it climate change or not. The responses called for to address the pollution of our air, water, and land are the same. Climate change action is not just about slowing the rise of the earth's temperature, it's about slowing the rate of environmental devastation that threatens the quality of our lives. Our efforts to make life easier and more comfortable are destroying the planet.

Wilderness was one thing that was slowing the earth's decline. Large tracts of old growth and rain forests were cleaning the air. The great marshes that lined the coast lands were cleansing the water and mitigating the rate of sea level rise. The last I heard, only 2-4 % of the land in this country is still wilderness.

It was sacred for Israel as a place to encounter God. It is sacred for us as the rare place yet untouched by human greed and consumption. And when we gaze out over the Grand Canyon or view a panorama of the Rockies or wander through an old growth forest, or visit the desert in bloom, wilderness is a place where we, too, can recognize the creator.

It is not a mistake that John is in the wilderness preaching a baptism of repentance, calling for a renewal of faith, and announcing the coming presence of God. Wilderness is the perfect place to begin a sacred conversation. But for Jesus, it's the place where temptation occurs.

We should try not to get hung up on the tempter. It doesn't matter whether the devil was real or an individual or one side of the conscience balancing on Jesus' shoulder. If we take anything from the presence of the devil, it need be no more than that Jesus stood against whatever was wrong in the world. The temptations themselves are the more important part of the conversation.

The first distraction is food, not surprising after fasting forty days. But the temptation is not about the food. "If you are the Son of God," begins the tempter. The forty days is up. The fast should be over. Jesus is famished, and as a child of God, he certainly has the ability to change rocks into bread. Later he will multiply the loaves in order to feed a multitude. He could have been all about the food. There were lots of hungry people in Palestine, but he didn't feed them all. He didn't come parading into the world righting every injustice, overthrowing the Roman armies. He didn't come to do that, to make bread for himself, to demonstrate his power and authority.

We need bread for the body, but we need more than that to thrive. We need words that come from God. We are more than our bodies. We are children of God. Sometimes we are too busy consuming things, seeing to our perceived bodily needs, enriching our lives with stuff, that we miss the word that God has for us. We've been so afraid that we wouldn't have enough gas for our cars or oil to lubricate our machines and produce our

plastics that we've failed to notice that we don't need new sources. We've allowed the tempters, and executives in the fossil fuel industry, to sell us a bill of goods that not only do we not need, but is actually harmful to our health and future. We've turned rocks into bread and lost our souls in the process.

Jonathon Foer suggests that the world is on a suicide course, consuming resources in a way and at a pace that will lead to the extinction of human beings. We have climbed to the pinnacle of the temple and taken the devil's gambit: casting ourselves off, expecting the angels of God to save us. Again the devil says, "If you are the Son of God..." Jesus answers, "Do not put the Lord your God to the test." We've been going around using our privilege and expecting God to save us. Think of the children who keep acting out to see if their parents really love them. Sometimes the behavior becomes very dangerous.

The stakes seem pretty high here, but they get even higher on that mountain where Jesus can see all the kingdoms of the world, all the wealth that there is to see. They can be his if only he will worship the tempter. Much of our lives are committed to acquisition. It's not bad to save for college, to advance yourself in the workplace, to buy home, to plan for retirement, but we ought to pause and think about our level of consumption and whether we're more devoted to our personal and financial security or to following in the path of Christ.

It's an odd conversation in the wilderness where Jesus talks the devil. The wilderness is often understood as the place of testing or temptation. The story seems very contemporary to me. It recalls the temptations faced by our own culture: the temptation to feed the body and not the spirit, to presume that God will support us in everything we do, and to risk our souls for the sake of many things and much power.

Lent is a time to think about these things. I've talked more on the macro level about ways in which we, as a society, have fallen to temptation, but there are individual decisions we make every day that reflect a choice between serving ourselves and serving God. "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness," says Jesus. "Do not worry about what you shall eat or drink... for God knows you have need of these things." We need less than we think. We lean too heavily on our status as children of God. We pursue things that are not good for us. This is a season for listening more closely to God, for consuming and presuming less. It's a season for that sacred conversation when we examine our temptations and seek God's help in living the life of the spirit, in following Jesus. Amen.