

Lent I – February 22, 2026

Matthew 4:1-11

Into the Wild

*A sermon preached by The Rev. Dianne Andrews at
St. Barnabas Episcopal Church, Bainbridge Island, WA.*



We who are gathered here together today... have willingly consented to explore the stark landscape of Lent... an invitation that invites us to shift our routines, deepen our devotions... and to go places we don't normally go. We have crossed the border into the vast stillness of a wilderness season.

One of my favorite preachers, Barbara Brown Taylor, tells a story about a presenter who was giving a workshop for youth leaders about taking students on “wilderness” trips. The purpose of these trips was to give young people a “taste of life nearer the edge.” The youth would hike, go white water rafting, tackle ropes courses, and engage in other activities meant to challenge them... at the limits of their comfort zones. A man in the audience asked the presenter, “On your wilderness trips, are there predators in those places who are above you on the food chain?” “Well of course not,” the presenter said, “I wouldn't put the students in danger like that.” “I wouldn't either,” the man said, “But don't lull them into thinking that they have experienced true wilderness. It's only wilderness... if there's something out there that can eat you.”¹ Yikes! That statement puts a different spin on Lent, doesn't it?

There are many ways of encountering the wilderness. The U.S. government defines “wilderness” as a “minimum of not less than 5,000 contiguous acres of roadless area.” The wilderness can be viewed as a place for great outdoor adventure and physical challenge. For naturalists, the wilderness is an “open book” to be explored... in which plants, animals, ecosystems and geological contexts can be analyzed and documented. For the romantic, the wilderness is poetry. For the spiritual and religious, there are varying views. Biblical and spiritual writings have portrayed the wilderness as a “realm of temptation, threat, and death... the haunt of scorpions, demons and wild beasts.” After being freed from slavery in Egypt, the Hebrew people wandered in the wilderness for 40 years led by a pillar of cloud by day, and a pillar of fire by night. In the desert wilderness, God's people murmured and complained... yet they were fed with manna from heaven... the sweet flaky bread that showed up like dew every

¹ Oral story from Barbara Brown Taylor's personal experience.

morning. Forty years of wandering helped shape Moses' people into God's covenant people. The wilderness is most certainly experienced differently by different people. The wilderness is not only a physical place, it can be a starkly vivid inner environment than can spark the imagination, test worn out patterns, and invite true transformation.

In his book *Backpacking with the Saints*, Beldon Lane cautions readers about taking a simplistic, reductionist view of the wilderness. Beldon writes,

...In their search for meaning, [religious writers] reach for a reality beyond the thing itself. They forget that it's enough for turkey vultures circling over an Ozark creek to be turkey vultures. [Turkey vultures] don't have to be symbols of death or evil. Naturalists, on the other hand occupy themselves with observing, counting and listing what is simply there. ...In the end, it can't be one or the other – either scientific objectivity or creative imagination. Writing about the human experience of wilderness requires a deliberate dance between the two, rigorous attention to detail and a fierce delight in beauty.²

In the Christian tradition, the western Church has emphasized a concept of the wilderness as a place to engage in spiritual warfare, as did the desert father St. Anthony the Great... who left behind a life of comfort to become an ascetic hermit in the Egyptian desert. Anthony is considered to be the prototype of a Christian monk. Tradition says that the devil wage war on Anthony. His original biographer, Athanasius, who was a 4th century contemporary of Anthony, wrote of Anthony's experience in the desert like this: "...the devil fought Anthony by afflicting him with boredom, laziness, and the phantoms of women, which he overcame by the power of prayer." During one 20-year stretch, Anthony's wilderness home was an enclosure in an abandoned Roman fort. His only communication with the outside world was a slit in the door through which food could be passed, and through which he could offer advice to those who would come and stand outside the door to listen to him. For two decades, Anthony fought with the devil. According to *Wikipedia* we learn:

Then one day, [Anthony] emerged from the fort with the help of villagers, who broke down the door. By this time most had expected him to have wasted away or to have gone insane in his solitary confinement. Instead, he emerged healthy, serene, and enlightened. Everyone was amazed that he had been through these trials and emerged spiritually rejuvenated. [Anthony] was hailed as a hero and from this time forth the legend of Anthony began to spread and grow.³

Anthony's wilderness... was not wide-open spaces. His wilderness... was enclosed solitude. Anthony's abode was a crucible for wrestling with his demons. Anthony battled with the devil until the battle was complete.

Every year, on the first Sunday in Lent, we hear either Matthew, Mark, or Luke's version of Jesus' time in the desert. Mark offers the shortest version in which he hear, simply, that Jesus was *driven* by the Spirit into the wilderness for 40 days and was tempted by Satan. In Mark's gospel, we do not get a listing of the three temptations that are offered by Luke and

² Beldon C. Lane, *Backpacking with the Saints: Wilderness Hiking as Spiritual Practice*, Oxford University Press, 2015, pg. 222.

³ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anthony_the_Great

Matthew. In all three versions, Jesus is fresh from his baptism in the River Jordan. He is filled with the Holy Spirit... still savoring the word “beloved” that anointed him at a most pivotal moment in his life. Jesus is about to begin his ministry of teaching and healing in the world... but before he begins his ministry... Jesus encounters the wilderness.

In Matthew and Luke... we hear about three temptations. It is the devil, *diabolos* in Greek... “diablo” in Spanish... “the false accuser”... who pesters Jesus in the wilderness. Each time the devil offers a temptation, Jesus refuses to give into the false vision of power that is being offered. Jesus was famished, yet he did not take the bait that was dangled before him... a temptation that would convince the world that Jesus was the Son of God. Nor did Jesus succumb to the temptation to feed his empty belly. Instead of turning stone into bread, Jesus quotes Deuteronomy 8:3 that says, “It is written, ‘One does not live by bread alone.’” The next temptation is for Jesus was to gain power, glory and authority over all the kingdoms of the world... if... he would worship the devil. But... what power and authority would Jesus gain if he were to turn away from God and from himself? Jesus quotes from the sixth chapter of Deuteronomy: “It is written, ‘Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.’”⁴ For the final temptation, Jesus is taken to the pinnacle of the temple in Jerusalem where his faith in God is challenged. God’s love and power would be proven, said the devil, when... after Jesus throws himself off the pinnacle... angels fly to catch Jesus. Jesus then quotes the Deuteronomist once again: “Do not put the Lord your God to the test.”⁵ “When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time.” Jesus firmly resisted the temptations to be relevant, to be spectacular, and to be powerful. In his book *In the Name of Jesus* Henri Nouwen writes of the temptation to be powerful... this way:

*One of the greatest ironies of the history of Christianity is that leaders constantly gave into the temptation to power – political power military power, economic power, or moral and spiritual power – even though they continued to speak in the name of Jesus, who did not cling to his divine power but emptied himself and became as we are. What makes the temptation of power so seemingly irresistible? Maybe it is that power offers an easy substitute for the hard task of love. It seems easier to be God than to love God, easier to control people than to love people, easier to own life than to love life.*⁶

The temptations are... clearly... still with us. In principle, there is nothing wrong with food, safety, and power when they are used for the good. The challenge... and our vocation as Christians... however... is to keep our focus on the love of God in our work of caring discipleship in the world. Whether in the wilderness of nature, or the wilderness of our daily lives... we are called to be like Jesus by walking in the ways of life and love for the well-being for all... and devoting ourselves to the task of loving, even when it is challenging.

In general, what does the wilderness *really* offer us? Simply stated, the wilderness offers us nothing but fierce indifference. We bring to the wilderness... *whatever form the wilderness may take for us at any given time*... we bring ourselves. We bring our “stuff” ... our fears, our hungers, our curiosity, and our awe. In the wilderness, our ancestors encountered

⁴ Deuteronomy 6:13

⁵ Deuteronomy 6:16

⁶ Henri J.M. Nouwen, *In the Name of Jesus: Reflections on Christian Leadership*, New York: Crossroads publishing, 1989.

many hardships. Fear and danger were constant companions. In the desert, the ancient Hebrews new hunger, thirst, scorching sun and bitter cold. Rabbi Abraham Heschel has described the wilderness as offering the gift of “radical amazement.” Hebrew prophets would have experienced rugged terrains with a physical reality imbued with great mystery... a kind of experience that, as Heschel writes, “makes the flesh crawl and the hair stand on end.”⁷ The wilderness offers the extremes of danger and awe... life on the edge. The question is: how do these extremes of danger, awe, and great indifference inform our overall experience of the wilderness?

The Lenten journey does not promise comfort and ease, but it most certainly invites us to engage with the wide-open spaces of spirit... a wilderness setting that is the stage within which to encounter, engage, and wrestle with the temptations that seek to keep us from the new and abundant life into which God is calling us... especially when the chaos of our times seeks to keep us off-balance, off-center, maybe even paralyzed.

Jesus came to show us the way... and to tell us that the Reign of God is near.

We have followed Jesus into the wilderness of Lent.

Blessings... and challenges... await us.

We take the whole of ourselves with us on this Lenten Journey...

our curiosity, our humility, our respect, our trepidation,

our hopes...

the whole of our unfinished beings...

May we pay rigorous attention to the details of our wilderness experience

and know fierce delight in the beauty we encounter.

Very importantly, may we forever walk in the love of God known in Christ Jesus...

...And may we take with us the benediction of St. John of the Cross who wrote:

*“...go forth with no other light or guide
than the one burning in [our] heart[s].*

Blessings on your wilderness journey...

Amen...

⁷ Op.cit. Beldon, pg. 226.