

Series: Steadfast Love
Sermon: Rescue Me
Scripture: Psalm 91 and Luke 4:1-13

First Sunday in Lent
March 9, 2025
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Sweet, gentle Luke gives us the perfect entrance into the Lenten season. If we read the story of Jesus' temptation in the wilderness in Mark's Gospel, we would have read that Jesus was driven into the wilderness by the Spirit. This feels...unsettling. It feels as if Jesus has no choice, that as soon as he rose from his baptism waters and heard God declare, "You are my son, the beloved, of whom I am pleased" he disappeared and was plopped down in the wilderness, hair still dripping wet and mind disoriented and confused. Luke offers a more gentle understanding...Jesus was led, by the Spirit, into the wilderness. It feels like a very Lenten thing to say.

In these 40 days before Easter, we are invited to observe a holy Lent and that means, in part, letting the Spirit lead us into a Spiritual wilderness. We don't know if Jesus literally went to a wilderness, but we know he was prone to go to desolate places when he wanted to fast and pray and seek God's guidance. Or maybe it is simply a metaphor for Jesus facing a spiritual struggle with what it means to be a beloved Son of God. I mean, we all go through that as some point right? Figuring out what it means to live as a child of God. However it happened, Luke wants us to see the wilderness as a place of discover and resilience, not as a place of loss and abandonment. For Luke, this wilderness is a place in which we can find strength in God's presence to withstand all that tempts us to stray from God. I think this is important for us as we embark on our own Lenten journey.

Lent is an invitation to let the Spirit lead us into a place of fasting, praying, and solitude to focus on the things of faith that we have ignored, or neglected, or misdirected. Ultimately, if we take the journey seriously, it will also lead us to consider the ways we have fallen to temptation and strayed from God's will. It is a time in which we ask ourselves, "What needs to change, or be affirmed? Where have we placed our trust...misplaced it...along the way, and if we have how do we get back to the place where we can see God again?"

While I'm convinced that the fullness of this story is about revealing the nature of Christ to us, I feel that there is a truth for us in the wilderness as well: a truth about power and how we perceive it and how we use it...or how it is used by evil to lure us away from God, and Lent is a great time to consider those questions.

It is a story that reminds of two truths: one, that evil exists, and two, that evil doesn't want you to figure out what allows it to thrive in the world...which is fear. Fear holds power. And if evil can control what you fear, it can manipulate you to act in certain ways to overcome that which you fear. Which often means making sinful choices that lack the love, grace, mercy, compassion, and holiness God wants us to exhibit. Or, fear can cause us to embrace an apathy that allows evil to run unchecked because we fear standing up to it. Fear holds power. Jesus appears to have no struggle standing up to evil...but we know the struggle is real...because most of us feel fear deeply.

Jesus comes to be bread for the world, to give us himself in ways that will nurture all people and satisfy all hunger...and evil says, "Why worry about the world? They aren't starving at the moment. Feed yourself."

Jesus comes to usher in the kingdom of God, to bring love and mercy and justice on earth as it is in heaven...and evil says, "Why wait to usher it in? I hold power at the moment. Just worship me and I'll give you the glory of all the people NOW, without the struggle of doing what is holy and right."

Jesus comes to die for our sins and redeem and cleanse us so that we are able to stand before God with rejoicing...and evil says, "Die? Surely not." Evil, actually gets more crafty and uses scripture to tempt Jesus...the very scripture you read earlier in the service, Psalm 91.

Psalm 91 is sometimes called the soldiers prayer. It is a prayer of assurance that no harm will come to those who trust in the Lord. Now, we understand that often poetry, as a psalm or a song, has language that is hyperbolic or imaginative. All of us know, using experience, reason, and tradition, that bad things still happen to good people. The Devil takes two verses from that psalm and tempts Jesus to sin by putting God to the test.

The result of a human Jesus jumping off a high ledge, will be death and evil knows it, but at least it will prevent him from saving the world. The fullness of Psalm 91 is that we should have no fear of suffering or harm because we trust that God is with us in the midst of it and will rescue us...if not in this life, then in our eternal one.

What these temptations stir in us is the fear that we will be left hungry...that our fasting will not be enough to save us. We fear what happens to us if we don't go along with the worldly powers trying to convince us that we must be the ones gloried and no one else. We fear that God won't save us in the ways we expect...temporal, immediate ...but that we will suffer and have hardship and not find the peace in this life that we desire.

So, Lent is the time where we work on those fears. It is the time that work toward the faith of Jesus so that we can push those fears aside and trust fully in God...withstand the temptation of evil.

We might fast and ask ourselves, what am I hungry for? What am I feeling empty of? Have I strayed from God in trying to fill the emptiness? Am I trusting God in the midst of my emptiness to fill me in other ways? Jesus says, we don't live by bread alone. We don't live on just what the world offers. God provides all we need.

Lent means we might engage in self-reflection and ask ourselves, "Am I anxious about who holds the power? Do I fear that if I don't fall in line with them, I will be vulnerable, given a label and persecuted? Will I stand against evil, even when it holds power for the moment?" Jesus, "Worship the Lord your God and serve only him." God is the power of good in the midst of a broken world and that is where true glory lies.

We might study scripture and ask ourselves, "How has God been with those who suffered? Where is the hope when others have died? Where is the good news when the world has been evil and hard?" Jesus says, "Do not put the Lord your God to the test." Trust in God for your rescue, it will surely come.

The temptations Jesus face were temporary issues of need, power, and trust...but God invites us to let go of our fear that needs won't be met, or worldly power must be worshipped to survive, or that trust means self-preservation. Jesus wants us to know that: Emptiness can be fruitful; Unjust power can be resisted; Life is offered for eternity, not temporarily

We don't have to fear...we are invited to have faith. We don't test God...we trust God. In that trust, is our rescue...rescue from the fear and anxiety that tempts us to serve evil rather than live for good.

Every temptation the Devil offered was meant to get Jesus to think only of himself and his own needs...but God empowers us to understand that loving God means looking beyond ourselves...it means keeping a right relationship with God and with those created in God's image...which is all of humanity. Fear will tempt us to turn our back on them...God will convince us to love them with Christ's outstretched arms. Jesus withstood the temptation to serve himself, and he remained steadfast in God's love...even though it meant carrying the burden of a cross.

So, when evil couldn't win, the Devil left him until an opportune time. It seems there is always an opportune time just lurking around the bend. We've all faced them, there will be more to come as we are tempted to give into the world's power and abandon God's.

Lent invites us to take a hard look at what is tempting us to behave differently than how God wants us to behave. It means finding the strength to resist temptation and to enter the wilderness and declare, "I am standing on holy ground, rescued only by God's steadfast love."