

"The Wilderness" A Sermon based on Genesis 2:15-17, 3:1-7; Matthew 4:1-11; and Romans 5:12-19 delivered by Rev. Alison Dutton Jacobs at the First Congregational UCC of Onekama, Michigan on Lent One, February 22, 2026

Jesus "full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, where for forty days he was tempted by the devil." The traditional forty days of fasting which were observed by the early church in the season before Easter, a season which we now call Lent, were meant to remember these forty days of Jesus in the wilderness.

Subsequently, Jesus forty days in the wilderness were reminiscent of the forty years that Israel wandered in the desert before God ushered them into the promised land. Forty—a biblical number of much significance!

In the Old Testament, any number based on multiples of four, denoted totality or wholeness. In the Greek influence of the New Testament times, forty was a round number. 40 years meant simply "a long time" and forty days meant "a shorter time." In the Greek numbers-based Pythagorean theory, on which some pagan spirituality was based, 40 days was the normal time for a fast. Forty also denoted the time of maturity. One had to be at least forty to be appointed to certain posts or jobs of significance. Forty also connoted fullness like in the Hebrew scriptures because it meant the normal period of a pregnancy (7 times 40 days).

Totality, wholeness, maturity, fullness of time resulting in birth or rebirth--all are images, which for a person in Jesus' time would have been triggered by the use of the phrase "for forty days" and "forty nights." These are also all things which Jesus gained from his time of solitude in what has been translated by biblical scholars as "wilderness." He gained wholeness, and maturity and a totality of ethical spirit and even rebirth.

What is interesting is that the word for "wilderness" here, which is *heremo* in Greek, does not really denote what we picture as a wilderness—a place devoid of food, shrubbery, an arid place, a desert—lacking water—a

drab place—lacking color. Rather, the Greek word, *heremo*, the word from which we get our word "hermit" means a lot more about the solitude that Jesus sought than about geography! It means a deserted place--rather than a desert--it means a place of solitude.

We have no way of knowing where this wilderness experience of Jesus actually took place--nor can we even, from the scriptural witness, be sure that Jesus was even alone! Remember what the scripture said. "Jesus full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was **led by** the Spirit in the wilderness, ..." Not he was led by the Spirit **into** the wilderness—dropped-off and left at a deserted bus stop to fend for himself—but he was led by the Spirit in the wilderness. What this means, and the Greek is fairly clear on this, is that the Spirit "accompanied" him in the wilderness. The Greek word *ago*, which is the Greek word used for "led" means to "conduct," or to "guide." It never means to force someone to do something — it means that one "journeys with and guides" someone else. How different our passage would sound to us if we read it, "Jesus full of the Holy Spirit, returned from Jordan" and was "conducted and guided" by the Spirit in the wilderness.

Even more interesting is the fact that the word for "led" here *ago* is the same word from which "synagogue" comes. Synagogue is a combination of the Greek prefix "*syn*" meaning "with or walk along in a common way" and *agoge* which means "to instruct." So, a synagogue was a place where people instructed each other by walking along in a common way! Jesus' time in the wilderness was just such an experience, then, but his "rabbi" was not a human being, but the Holy Spirit!

So, when the devil—Greek *diablo* meaning "slanderer" or "twister of meanings," tempted Jesus, he was not alone, Being human, however, he still had to decide between what his guide was telling him and the twisted

meanings that the devil was offering him—but he was not left alone to do that—remember—he was "full of the Holy Spirit."

As the forty days progressed, the human Jesus no doubt, had the same doubts that we all have when we are hungry, hurting, and miserable from lack of sleep, but he also had a special knowledge of the presence of the Spirit, as Spirit which acted as a "synagogue" would for him—which reminded him of the teachings of his upbringing--in just such a place—place where he had learned his scriptures well—so well that he could quote them as rebuttal to each of *diablos* twisted tempting suggestions.

Remember? When the devil tempts him to change the stones into bread—Jesus quotes from Deuteronomy 8:3 "you understand that one does not live by bread alone," when *diablo* tempts him with the possession of all the kingdoms of the world if he will just worship the devil, Jesus quotes from Deuteronomy again. Chapter 6 v 13 "The Lord your God you shall fear him you shall serve, and by his name alone you shall swear." And, then, finally, when the devil — who cleverly picks up on Jesus' own defense of quoting from scriptures—when the devil—the ultimate twister of words—tempts Jesus to throw himself from the temple, to prove that God would really save him, the devil does so by quoting from Psalm 91 vv. 11-12—"For he will command his angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways. On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone. . . .;" But, Jesus "full of the Holy Spirit" and "led by the Spirit in the wilderness" is still strong enough not to be swayed by a mere twisting of the scriptures and he steadfastly quotes again from Deuteronomy 6:16 — putting a stop to the devil's present attempts to tempt him by very simply saying, " It is said, 'Do not put t h e Lord your God to the test' "

"It is written," " It is said," In the synagogue, at the feet of Rabbi's, the boy Jesus had learned the word of God well, especially the word of the beloved

book of the law "Deuteronomy." Deuteronomy, so much more beloved than all the other books of the Torah because it was rediscovered by Jesus' Jewish ancestors after their own wilderness experience in the form of the Exile in Babylon—and it by virtue of this "synagogue" experience—this "walking in common with the Spirit" experience in a place of solitude—this being "led" ago by the Spirit in the wilderness, that Jesus is able to finally reach the maturity to go on with his ministry.

And where does he go from there? You guessed it--directly to the synagogues to share who he is and what he has learned! The very next passage—which follows this temptation passage—begins like this, "Then Jesus went and lived in Capernaum, . . . From that time on he began to preach." Jesus' "wilderness" experience, then, far from being a time in which he pinned away alone in a desert, was a time of rich learning during a "synagogue" experience with the Holy Spirit as Rabbi! It was time, out of which he returned to his ministry

We can all learn something from this--we can all remember that Christ did not leave us alone—he left us with this same Holy Spirit—this same Rabbi from the "wilderness" experience—to be our comforter and teacher—and he left us with a model for "sabbath-keeping." We all of us need times of solitude—times away from the hustle and bustle to listen more directly to what God is saying to us through the Holy Spirit in our own lives. Our moments at the Lord's table—can begin that process for us—but we all

also could take some time each week to just sit in quiet solitude and stop long enough to listen to the teachings of the Spirit.

We do not have to lock ourselves in a hermitage or a monastery—or go to a desert—we just need to sit quietly in a place of our own—without distractions—and listen carefully—for the Holy Spirit is always available to provide a "synagogue" experience, if we can just stop long enough to listen and follow! Amen.