

# FIRST SUNDAY OF LENT

by Rev. Emily Chapman

February 21, 2010

9:45 a.m. Service of Word and Table



## ST. PAUL'S

### UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

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**Lectionary Texts:** Deuteronomy 26:1-11; Psalm 91:1-2, 9-16; Romans 10:8b-13; and Luke 4:1-13

## Luke 4:1-13

*Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness,<sup>2</sup> where for forty days he was tempted by the devil. He ate nothing at all during those days, and when they were over, he was famished. <sup>3</sup>The devil said to him, “If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread.”*

*<sup>4</sup>Jesus answered him, “It is written, ‘One does not live by bread alone.’”*

*<sup>5</sup>Then the devil led him up and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. <sup>6</sup>And the devil said to him, “To you I will give their glory and all this authority; for it has been given over to me, and I give it to anyone I please. <sup>7</sup>If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours.”*

*<sup>8</sup>Jesus answered him, “It is written, ‘Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.’”*

*<sup>9</sup>Then the devil took him to Jerusalem, and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, “If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here, <sup>10</sup>for it is written, ‘He will command his angels concerning you, to protect you,’ <sup>11</sup>and ‘On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.’”*

*<sup>12</sup>Jesus answered him, “It is said, ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’”*

*<sup>13</sup>When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time.*

It was the third day of my trip to Israel this past fall. And we were leaving the city of Jerusalem for the first time and going out into the Judean wilderness. Now, when I think wilderness, I draw on the only experience I have of wilderness. I imagined something that looks like the piney woods of east Texas or the wooded foothills of the Appalachian Mountains in western North Carolina. I am not sure why it never occurred to me that what with Israel being in the Middle East, wilderness might not look quite like I imagined. Instead of feeling surrounded on every side by trees, I found myself staring at a vast desert that stretched out in every direction. I felt so very small.

I thought of someone being taken into this wilderness for 40 days; there was no food, no water in sight, and the sun beat down mercilessly. It looks unpredictable. This wilderness was nothing like I could have imagined, and seeing it made me feel like anyone led to it would feel — so small and so powerless. These are the feelings that time in the wilderness nearly always inspire. Chances are, you've been to the wilderness, too. We all have. It might not have looked like a vast desert, but it made you feel just as small. Maybe it looked like a hospital room, or an unemployment office, or the cheap motel room you went to after you got kicked out of your house. Maybe it's some place deep inside you, where you begged God to speak and heard nothing. Sometimes you may not even realize you're in the wilderness, and then one day you look around, and everything you have always relied on to keep you safe and happy is gone, and suddenly you are staring at life and feeling like you are staring at the massive wilderness, feeling so small and so powerless.

We'll do most anything to avoid the wilderness, won't we? Daniel Erlander, in his book *Manna and Mercy* calls it "wilderness school," a place where you go to learn the kind of person you are and are going to be. But who wants that sort of education? Because the first thing it always does is take away the safety net. We spend most of our time and money getting those safety nets in place and are likely to protest a bit when they are taken away. And here we are, at the beginning of Lent, our own 40-day journey, and we are starting in the wilderness with Jesus. Look what happens to him.

He is led out by the Spirit; he eats nothing for forty days and is famished when he comes out on the other side, where the devil awaits. But what happens? After all that time in the wilderness, we'd sort of expect to come out ready to grab at whatever food or shelter was offered, no matter who it came from. But Jesus doesn't do that. The time in the wilderness has given him freedom. He knows now that he cannot be distracted from his purpose on earth, that he will not be tempted by things that would fill him up but not give him life. His appetites tamed, he trusts the Spirit that led him to wilderness in the first place.

The wilderness is the only place to learn such difficult lessons, and they are almost always learned the hard way. But the Church has given us a gift to help us go

to wilderness school every year, voluntarily. Now, you can search the Bible all the way through and there won't be a thing about Lent in there. It didn't exist until well into the life of the Church, when Christians slowly began to devote themselves more fully to their own creature comforts — a warm bed, plenty of food, nicer homes. Barbara Brown Taylor explains the phenomenon like this:

They decided there was no contradiction between being comfortable and being Christian, and before long it was very hard to pick them out from the population at large. They no longer distinguished themselves by their bold love for one another. They did not get arrested for championing the poor. They blended in. They avoided extremes. They decided to be nice instead of holy, and God moaned out loud.

So, someone decided that it was time for the Christians to come back to who they really were. And the Bible certainly offered good hints on how to do this. A 40-day or year period of time is a frequent player in Scripture, from Moses and Elijah, who we ran into last week at the Transfiguration of Jesus, to Israel wandering 40 years in the desert, to our story today of Jesus' time in the wilderness. It wasn't easy. Wilderness school is never easy. But it was necessary. So is Lent. We have these 40 days where we try to remember what it means to trust only in God, to live by grace and not by our own power. We began it this week by smearing death on our foreheads, proclaiming to anyone looking that we were sinful, mortal, but belonged to God. We began a holy and difficult season with ashes on our heads, preparing us for the season to come. I have always tried to find good ways not to give up anything for Lent. To dismiss it as a pointless exercise or that I really ought to take something new up instead of laying something down. After all, how did it really make me more spiritual to give up chocolate or caffeine? But the more I think about it, the more significant the idea of giving up seems to me.

We have entered a time where we try to give up an addiction — whatever it is we use to fill empty places that by all rights, belong to God. We all use something —

maybe it's reruns of *Law and Order*, maybe it's Facebook, or your cell phone, or a glass of wine, Danielle Steele novels or online shopping. None of these things are terrible things. But the way we use them is our problem. They aren't bad things, but they are distractions. These are the things we reach for when we are too tired or too afraid to face the wilderness in front of us. They are the things we use to avoid feeling small and powerless, never realizing that only then do we recognize God's strength and power.

Most of us cannot hear the still small voice of God speaking in the wilderness over the clamor around us, yet we prefer the clamor because a silent, unpredictable wilderness is so terrifying. Yet, it is Lent, and whether you think you are in a wilderness or not, Lent is a wilderness time, a time where we try to let go of some of those things we use like a shot of anesthesia so that we do not have to really face how it feels to live the kind of life we live. Taking away those painkillers we have been addicted to is never easy. Lent is time where we learn how loud silence can be once the iPod ear phones are out, where we learn how long the night is once the television is turned off, how hard it might be to get to sleep with the wine bottle tucked away, where we have to find out what happens when we stop blaming other people for everything, where we see what might become of us if we stopped compulsively taking care of everyone else all the time.

We always tell ourselves that losing these things we rely on is going to kill us. In a culture of excess, to deny one's self anything feels like fate worse than death. But it hardly ever is. And during Lent, we get to practice wilderness school so we are ready when the exam comes. In our time in the wilderness, perhaps we can learn to tame those appetites for things that will never save us and learn how to trust in the Spirit that leads us. And it really might be just as simple as turning off the TV, or dropping the Hershey bar, and putting the iPod in a drawer for a few weeks. That voice in your head may tell you that you need it, that God would want you to have it if you are really loved, that you'll go crazy without it and what is the big deal about giving up anyway?

Read the story from Luke again and remember whose voice that is. Tell the devil to take a hike and decide for yourself what you'll do for Lent — it's not too late — and it's never too late to remember to whom you belong, so that you might “worship the Lord your God and serve [no other]” for the rest of your life.