

“God Transforms Us”

Matthew 53:16-4:11

Pastor James York

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Lent is a celebration of God transforming us. Often lent is a somber celebration, of soul searching, confession and repentance. Often lent takes us deep into the wilderness so we can learn our true identity. Lent convinces us that there is something wrong with each of us, all of us; something that needs to be acknowledged, confessed; something that needs to be put right, redeemed, reconciled, atoned for, covered over, bridged, forgiven. Lent prepares us for Easter. The infinite joy, glory, and abundant eternal life of Easter is more fully perceived when we prepare by honestly pondering our human condition. Resurrection happens after journeying through the wilderness, suffering, being betrayed, feeling abandoned, pain, crucifixion, and dying. Lent is a transformation welcoming the free gift of God's forgiveness and grace that declares our identity as God's beloved child.

Lent begins on Ash Wednesday. We acknowledge that we are mere dust. We acknowledge our mortality. We acknowledge that we have life solely by God's grace that created us. We acknowledge that we have sinned, made a mess of our life, and the cosmos. We acknowledge that we will be resurrected solely by God's grace that transforms us.

On this first Sunday of Lent we are invited to hear that all of us are God's beloved children, that you are God's beloved child. We are invited to strip away the masks under which we daily live and come face to face with our identity. We are assured that absolutely nothing will separate us from God's love. We will journey through wildernesses and God is with us every moment. God reminds us that our identity is an eternal, cherished member of God's family.

Matthew 3:16-4:11 NLT “After his baptism, as Jesus came up out of the water, the heavens were opened, and Jesus saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and settling on him. And a voice from heaven said, “This is my dearly loved Son, who brings me great joy.” Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted there by the devil. For forty days and forty nights Jesus fasted and became very hungry. During that time the devil came and said to Jesus, “If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become loaves of bread.” But Jesus told him, “No! The Scriptures say, ‘People do not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.’” Then the devil took Jesus to the holy city, Jerusalem, to the highest point of the Temple, and said, “If you are the Son of God, jump off! For the Scriptures say, ‘God will order God’s angels to protect you. And they will hold you up with their hands, so you won’t even hurt your foot on a stone.’” Jesus responded, “The Scriptures also say, ‘You must not test the Lord your God.’” Next the devil took Jesus to the peak of a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their glory. “I will give it all to you,” the devil said, “if you will kneel down and worship me.” “Get out of here, Satan,” Jesus told him. “For the Scriptures say, ‘You must worship the Lord your God and serve only God.’” Then the devil went away, and angels came and took care of Jesus.”

Sometimes it is through our wilderness experiences that we come to really, fully, embrace, to believe, to the core of our being, that we are God's beloved. Frederick Buchner says, “sin is centrifugal; sin pushes everything out and away from the center of our being, until there's nothing there but self. Sin is finally selfishness, self-centeredness, self-confidence, pride; that secret sense, that I, truly am the center of the universe: Me, Mine, My nation, My religion, My tribe, My race, My clan, Me.”

Fasting in the wilderness reveals our identity. We cannot survive without food. We cannot survive without love. Apart from God we are mere dust. Surrounded with food, family, friends, money, stuff it is easy to get identity from work, success, family, power. When all is well, it is nice to hear, “you are God's dearly loved child.” When you are in the wilderness, your identity as God's beloved is your only lifeline.

The Holy Spirit led Jesus into wilderness, so the fully human nature of Jesus will come to absolutely know his eternal identity as God's beloved son. This is the first temptation. Jesus just heard God say to him. “You are my dearly loved Son, who brings me great joy.” Yet his first temptation is if you are the Son of God. We are all tempted to doubt our identity as God's child, to doubt if God is always with us, to doubt that God

answers every prayer. After the temptations, the Angels came and took care of Jesus to assure him that he is God's beloved son.

Jesus was tempted to be less than his identity. Jesus is the bread of life for everyone. Jesus fed thousands. Jesus was tempted to turn a stone into bread for himself. Jesus is risen from the dead. Angels celebrated Jesus' resurrection. Jesus will raise us all from the dead. Jesus was tempted to jump off the temple and have angels rise him up. Jesus will redeem, perfect and glorify everyone sustaining the kingdom of heaven with ever growing love for eternity. Jesus was tempted to settle for earthly kingdoms.

We are tempted to be less than our identity. God constantly fills us with an infinite supply of love, joy, and peace for us to share with everyone. God fills us with grace to forgive everyone. God has gifted us with talents and creativity to make wonderful things. God fills us with God's Holy Spirit enabling us to do abundantly more than we can dream or imagine. We are tempted to take shortcuts, take the easy way out, to be less than our identity, a creative, loving, joyful, talented, gracious, gifted, child of God.

Lent invites us to open up, to listen, to perceive, to realize that God is infinitely more loving and joyful than we can imagine. God has more facets, power, creativity than we can imagine. Lent invites us to see the loving things God is doing through us, how our loving, sharing, caring, creating, is expanding the grandeur of the cosmos.

When we are tempted to lose hope, dream small and put God in a box. When we despair to be less; we become out of tune. Barbara Brown Taylor tells of tuning the E note on her stringed instrument. Out of tune she felt the disharmony. When the string she was tuning found E, she writes, "My whole body agreed. The note inside me and the note outside of me were the same note. Since I live with a lot of doubt, the tuning of the E string had a large effect on me. After years of seeking certainty about the things that cannot be seen, I have pretty much surrendered to the necessity of faith: that love will last, that goodness has power, that God is real. I cannot lay hand on any of these things any more that I can hold an E note up by the stem. Even when I am not searching for it, the note is there. It was real before I ever was, and it will remain real."

The actual, physical wilderness Jesus wandered in is south of Jericho. Miles and miles, as far as the eye can see, of arid, rocky desert, no contrast, no green, no noticeable life. The utter barrenness is frightening. The silence is literally deafening, so silent that you hear a humming in your head from your own nervous system. There are no paths. There is no oasis in sight. Everything is angry, hard, sharp, gritty, dusty.

Sometimes the Holy Spirit leads us into the wilderness and sometimes we are dumped in the wilderness by our circumstances. Without warning, you find yourself unemployed, for instance, and you wake up in a wilderness, not knowing what to do, cut loose from your moorings. Suddenly the relationship that has given your life meaning and purpose ends and you're lost. Suddenly a dear one dies, a friend leaves. Suddenly your lifelong religion starts to shake and seem not nearly so certain. Suddenly you find yourself wondering if your life has made any sense at all—wondering what you should do next. Suddenly you are anxious, depressed, your thoughts are wild and unkind. Suddenly you are injured, sick, lethargic and you doubt you will ever be well again.

Kathleen Norris found herself in the wilderness after the illness, death and resurrection of her husband. She had no idea how to inhabit the devastating word, widow. As for prayer, she was not surprised, that when she needed the consolation that prayer can bring, she was unable to pray. That is the wilderness of grief, the terrible loneliness of grief that feels like utter abandonment, isolation. Finally, Kathleen found a prayer she could pray in the wilderness. "This is another day, O Lord. I know not what it will bring forth, but make me ready, Lord, for whatever it may be. If I am to stand up, help me to stand bravely. If I am to sit still, help me to sit quietly. If I am to lie low, help me to do it patiently. And if I am to do nothing, let me do it gallantly."

Often the wilderness reveals the value of love, family, friends. Often the wilderness reveals the value of things, music, art, books, food. Wilderness invites us to imagine how we will be healed, made whole, complete, perfected and glorified. Wilderness tends to rearrange our priorities, tends to make us aware that we are dust. Wilderness teaches us to cherish every facet of life, peace, love and joy. Wilderness reveals God's grace, that God is tearing open the heavens, to declare God's love for you. Wilderness makes us aware that we are God's beloved, that angels are waiting on us, that we have a glorious resurrection beyond our grandest imagination ahead.

God is with us in our wilderness. God will never leave us grieving, or broken, or hurting, or suffering, or longing. God will complete us. God has given us a name, an identity, infinite worth, dignity all guaranteed in

the unconditional, unalterable, gracious, eternal being and love of God. And when we are in the wilderness we often feel alone, abandoned. We are unable to perceive God's presence. We are overwhelmed with our sin, guilt, shame, illness, brokenness and burdens. We are unable to imagine the magnitude of God's love, the transformation of resurrection. We do not know where to go, what to do, how to be, how to live. And angels continually wait upon us revealing love in multiple facets.

Jesus learned in the wilderness that whatever happens God will never abandon him, that whatever limits he had to endure, such as hunger, loneliness, weakness, suffering, death; he is ultimately safe in God's love that will sustain him forever. God's love will lift him up. God's love will give him the strength and courage to love. God will tear open the heavens to resurrect Jesus and welcome Jesus home for eternity.

God is with you in the wilderness for you are God's dearly loved child who brings God great joy. Angels are waiting on you. Easter is coming. Amen