

This past Wednesday we entered into the season of Lent, a forty-day season of preparation before Easter. Together we buried the word, Alleluia, as a corporate way to give up something we love for Lent. This word will be unburied and on the altar on Easter Sunday. On Ash Wednesday I acknowledged that we have really been in the season of Lent for the past year as each day we have faced our own mortality.

So, like everything else, this year Lent is going to be a little different. Instead of spending time sacrificing more things, when it feels like we have sacrificed so much, my prayer for you this Lenten season is that you will add things in that will give you life and renewal as you focus on Christ.

We will still follow Christ to the wilderness, but we remember that Christ did not stay there forever. The time he spent there was important as it helped prepare him for what was ahead. During this season of wilderness that we have experienced the past year, God is also preparing us to go forward. Together during this season, we enter the wilderness and follow Jesus Christ to the cross and ultimately to the tomb and beyond.

In your Lenten packet you have been given some small stones to represent this wilderness time. Today I invite you to take those stones out and place them in front of you. You may already have a make-shift altar created with all your Lenten elements. Hold the stones in your hands. See how they have jagged edges, but ultimately have been made smooth by water. Remember that throughout this season, Christ continues to be our source of life and “living water.” Now, let us follow Christ into the wilderness.

The people of God have always been wanderers. The people of Babel were scattered throughout the world, the Israelites wandered in the wilderness for forty years, and the disciples of Christ wandered from place-to-place following Jesus. We, too, are invited to wander with Christ during this season of Lent.

The word lent comes from the word “*lencten*” which means to “lengthen and refers to the lengthening days of spring.”¹ As light lingers a little more each day during this season, we also are called to lengthen our spiritual disciplines and commitment to God. This season of 40-days begins with Jesus in the wilderness being tempted by Satan.

I have always found it strange that as soon as Jesus was baptized, that God led him by the Holy Spirit into the wilderness.

I have always thought, “Come on God! Let Jesus start his ministry with the people and heal and do all those amazing miracles!” And, yet God led Jesus to the wilderness to instill in Christ a strong foundation so that he would be prepared for all the trials ahead.

In the Old Testament book of Deuteronomy, we hear about the importance of preparation...the preparation that goes into growing beautiful fruit. This process does not happen overnight and requires hard work, a gentle, but steady hand, and constant care. God required the Israelites to bring the first fruits, the best fruits, as an offering to God. When they brought this offering before God, they were reminded that these fruits were really a gift from God who gave them the land.²

What is beautiful is that they participated in an important liturgy when they dropped off their fruit with the priest. They retold the story of their ancestor Jacob who was once a wanderer.³ Commentary calls this a “confession of faith” which retold “the story of God’s actions that had shaped the nation’s faith.”⁴

These offerings of first fruits, were not optional, they were required of each family.⁵ Unlike the sacrifices of animals, these offering were not burned on the altar, but given to the Levitical priests, and vulnerable populations including “resident aliens, orphans, and widows.”⁶ As we look to this Scripture we see that the Israelites were required to care for their neighbors as an embodiment of their faith and that through this sacrifice made to the Lord, they were blessed and given hope of a secure future with God’s provision for their lives.

Their gifts of these first fruits provided for the needs of others and allowed them to live into the covenant that God had made with them. In our society today we have made so many things optional, especially as it pertains to embodying our faith. Come to church, or not. Tithe, or not. Join a small group and participate in mission or not. Deuteronomy reminds us that beautiful fruit grows out of our strong foundation of faith in God. Our faith requires us to act and care for our neighbors and retell our story that we were once wanderers in the wilderness, but now we have found a home in the body of Christ and kingdom in God.

This Lent, I invite you to not let your faith be optional. Make it a priority. Make time to nurture your relationship with God every day and through this sacrifice of time you, like the Israelites, will be blessed and given hope for the future. We make sacrifices unto God, because God made sacrifices for us, most especially, through the gift of his Son, Jesus Christ on the cross. To sacrifice our lives to God, we must follow Jesus into the wilderness, even though we may not be ready to go there.

Have you ever been to the wilderness? The closest I have ever been to the wilderness was when I took a trip to the mountains of Mexico. The mountains were made of dirt and towered above the clouds and there was nothing else there. It was majestic and terrifying at the same time. You may be experiencing some of these same feelings as we descent into the season of Lent. We look forward to this time because it is an opportunity for self-discovery and growing in our faith, but sometimes this season can be terrifying as it can reveal old wounds and areas in our lives that God is calling us to grow.

As we wander with Jesus in the wilderness, we discover that Christ was confronted with many of the same temptations that we also struggle with. Temptation can take on many forms in our lives. Whether it is a battle from within us or from the external forces of wickedness, we are all tempted during this season of Lent to be lost in the wilderness and leave the safety of our Savior, Jesus Christ.

When we think we are lost, this is when it becomes easier to trust in others and ourselves instead of putting our trust in God. This is what Satan was tempting Jesus to do, to rely only upon himself and not God to provide for his needs to which Jesus responds: “One does not live by bread alone” (Luke 4:4).

Here Jesus told Satan that God would sustain him. So, the word of the Lord, the Bible also sustains us during this season of Lent. This is a wonderful practice to add in. Each day on your Lenten calendar you have been given a Scripture to meditate upon.

The request to make bread reminds us of the Israelites in the wilderness who were starving as they followed Moses to the Promised Land. They asked for bread, and God showered them with manna from heaven. Just as God provided for the Israelites, God continues to provide for our needs as well.

Like Christ in the wilderness, we too will be tempted to test God. Have you ever wanted God to show up immediately and explain our lives to us, or even one facet of our lives? During this season of Lent, we especially want to understand how God moves in our lives.

Sometimes we are not respectful of God’s timeline and we want things to happen immediately. Yet Jesus reminds us: ‘Again it is written, “Do not put the Lord your God to the test” (Luke 4:13). During this season of Lent, we too will be tested to give into our pride. We will be tested to put ourselves and our own wants and desires above the needs of God and our neighbors. We all want to feel important and loved these are basic human needs. What gets us in trouble is when we give into these temptations that leave us feeling empty and farther away from God.

To this temptation Jesus says: “Worship the Lord your God and serve only him” (Luke 4:8).

So often in our lives we give in to worshipping idols. The idol of convenience, the idol of social media, the idol of others who we hold on pedestals. When we worship these idols, we are not worshipping God. This season of Lent, I invite you to make your altar with all the materials from the Lenten packet. Each time you pass by it take a moment to stop and reflect. Center yourself in worship before the Lord and say a simple thank you to God.

When our lives are grounded in gratitude for God it is easier to focus on God and God alone. This season of Lent I invite you to find one thing each day that you are thankful for. It can be something simple or something profound. Adding in this practice of giving thanks during this season will help awaken you to the fact that God is still offering us blessings each day.

This Lent is also a time for us to name where we are. What kind of wilderness has the Holy Spirit found you in during this season? It is the wilderness of isolation, despair, depression, grief, poverty of spirit or finances? Do you feel like you are stuck in the wilderness, or do you feel the presence of the Holy Spirit moving you forward?

In Lent we must be intentional to continue to follow Christ. We are not wandering aimlessly. Each step has a purpose, each step reveals to us more and more about the Son of God. Each step brings us closer to understanding Christ’s sacrifice for us on the cross.

The good news for us lives today is that Jesus prevailed against Satan in the wilderness, and Christ continues to defeat death and darkness in the world today.

So, today we also sit with Christ, in the wilderness, in this Lenten time of preparation as we await our hearts being infiltrated once again by the Holy Spirit. May we continue to be open to how the Holy Spirit is calling us to respond to God today and always. In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

¹ <https://www.umc.org/en/content/ask-the-umc-what-is-lent-and-why-does-it-last-forty-days>

² The New Interpreter’s Commentary. Vol. 1. Abingdon Press: Nashville, TN. 2015. P. 1012.

³ Deuteronomy 26:5.

⁴ The New Interpreter’s Commentary. Vol. 1. Abingdon Press: Nashville, TN. 2015. P. 1012.

⁵ Ibid. P. 1014.

⁶ Ibid.