

This past Wednesday, on Ash Wednesday we started our 40-day Lenten journey. This season of Lent is all about letting go of the things that hold us back from fully surrendering our lives to God. It is a time of fasting, prayer, and repentance.

During the Ash Wednesday service, we took a moment in corporate repentance. We read Psalm 51 responsively, we buried the word “Alleluia” as a way for us all to give up something together. This is the very first word we utter on Easter Sunday so not saying it for these 40 days will make it even sweeter on that day. Each time we want to say it we are called to remember Christ’s sacrifice for us on the cross. And finally, we received ashes to mark us as sinners in need of God’s redeeming grace.

We also took a moment to write down something that had been holding us back in our relationship with God and placed it in a box. These notes will be burned on Good Friday as we remember that Christ takes on all our sin and all our brokenness on the cross.

As we venture with Christ from the wilderness to the cross this season of Lent, we will hear the seven ‘I am’ statements of Jesus Christ in the Gospel of John. Through reading these statements of Jesus and reading “The God We Can Know” by Rob Fuquay we will gain “powerful insights into the heart of God and God’s desire to know and be known.”ⁱ

In order to know the heart of God we must first start in the wilderness. In the book of Exodus, we see that the wilderness is the training ground for the people of God. It was through their time in the wilderness that the Israelites learned to fully trust in God who provided for all their needs.

But even before the Israelites, God was doing important work in the wilderness. Through our Scripture today in Exodus 3. We see and hear the call story of Moses.

Even from the time he was a baby Moses experienced God’s saving action upon his life. Remember he was sent down the river in a basket and retrieved by Pharaoh’s daughter. Even though Moses was Hebrew he spent his youth in the palace living the life of a privileged Egyptian.

Moses never lost a heart for his people and when he saw a Hebrew getting beaten by an Egyptian, he snapped and murdered that Egyptian. Knowing things could never go back to the way they were before, Moses fled to Midian. Midian was located “east of the Gulf of Aqaba in the northwestern regions of the Arabian Desert.”ⁱⁱ

So, Moses found himself in the wilderness. He was not alone, but found love, got married and worked for his father-in-law Jethro tending his flock. In is in this place that he encounters the living God.

What is interesting about Moses’ call story is that his calling from God came through fire. He saw a burning bush that was on fire but was not burning up. So, he went to get a closer look, and this is when he heard the voice of God calling him to save his people.

Moses was not eager to go back to Egypt because when he left Pharaoh wanted to kill him. Why would Pharaoh listen to him now? He asked God: ‘If I come to the Israelites and say to them, “The God of your ancestors has sent me to you”, and they ask me, “What is his name?” what shall I say to them?’ ¹⁴God said to Moses, ‘I AM WHO I AM.’ He said further, ‘Thus you shall say to the Israelites, “I AM has sent me to you.”’

Here we see the name of God revealed as “I AM.”

Rob Fuquay tells us “Thousands of years later Jesus declares ‘I am’...and identifies himself with the God of Moses. Yet, he does more than identify. He reveals further truths of this God, this God we can know and who wants to know us.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ we learn about the heart of God.

Right before our Scripture from the Gospel of Matthew we see Jesus was baptized and immediately after he was led by the Holy Spirit into the wilderness. Now this is important. God led Jesus into the wilderness, and it was God who would lead Christ out of it to begin his ministry.

In the Old Testament book of Exodus, we see the Israelites wandering through the wilderness for 40 years. At first, the Israelites were terrified of the wilderness. It was unfamiliar, unforgiving, and a strange place for them to live. Many times, they wanted to turn around and go home where slavery and oppression was waiting for them. They wanted to return to the familiar instead of seeing what God had for them in the Promised Land. Ultimately, it was in this time of wilderness that the Israelites were shaped and fashioned more closely in the image of God.

This is the purpose of Lent, for us to walk in the wilderness with God.

It is a time for us to be vulnerable before God as we repent of our sins and follow God out of the wilderness to the cross. God provided for the Israelites in the wilderness, and God will provide for us as we sit in tension seeing what God is calling us to do in the wilderness. It is in the wilderness that we are confronted with our sinful nature.

During this time of wilderness, like Christ, we too will be tempted. In order to prepare ourselves to face temptation in our lives Christ models that we should fast and pray. Before Christ ever encountered Satan, he fasted for 40 days.

Fasting is an important practice of our faith because it is how we can empty ourselves to be fuller of Christ. John Wesley, the founder of our denomination would fast every Friday to draw nearer to God.

During these 40 days we are called to take on the practice of fasting. Whether it is from a food we love, from Facebook, or from a behavior that is harmful to us and our relationship with God, fasting has been an important spiritual practice all throughout the Bible.

Like in any fast we take on during the season of Lent, we will be tempted to add that practice back into our lives. Just as Satan tempted Jesus to make bread, we too will be hungry for the things that have brought us comfort before, even if we do not need them.

Temptation can take on many forms in our lives. Whether it is from peer pressure from a family member or friend, or 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.

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 relying only upon himself and not God to provide for his needs to which Jesus responds: “One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God” (Matthew 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. This is why we are studying the Gospel of John these next couple of weeks so that we too can be sustained by the word of the Lord.

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” (Matthew 4:7).

“We’ve all heard the story of the man stranded during a flood. He begged God to rescue him. Along came a rowboat, a speedboat, and a helicopter; but he refused them all, waiting for God to miraculously rescue him. Well, he drowned and went to heaven. He asked God why he never answered his prayer. God told him He sent a rowboat, a speedboat, and a helicopter, but he failed to realize they came from God. The story helps us realize God has many ways to answer prayer, so we should not try to dictate how God should answer.”^{iv}

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, but what gets us in trouble is when we are tempted by power and pride which make empty promises to us and also lead us to trust only in ourselves and our abilities and not God.

To this temptation Jesus says: “Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him” (Matthew 4:10).

What kind of wilderness has the Holy Spirit led you into in your life? It is the wilderness of isolation, despair, depression, grief, poverty of spirit, or finances?

Lent is at time for us to be led by the Holy Spirit to follow Christ into the wilderness. It is in this time of wilderness that we encounter God and are given the strength and endurance to journey with Christ to the cross.

It is in the wilderness that our defenses are stripped away, and we can see ourselves honestly before God. We should not be afraid of this time of wilderness. We should look at it as a gift from God.

The good news for our lives today is that God will continue to sustain us and protect us even in our times in the wilderness.

May we continue to follow Jesus from the wilderness to the cross. In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Endnotes

ⁱ Rob Fuquay. “The God We Can Know.” Upper Room Books. Nashville, TN. 2014. P. 9.

ⁱⁱ <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Midianites>

ⁱⁱⁱ Rob Fuquay. “The God We Can Know.” Upper Room Books. Nashville, TN. 2014. P. 14.

^{iv} <https://urbanministries.com/man-asked-god-rescue-didnt-recognize-gods-answer/>

Additional Resources

New Interpreter’s Biblical Commentary. Vol. VIII. Abingdon Press. Nashville, TN. 1995.

Oremus online bible.