

Matthew 3:16 & 4: 1-11
 “Jesus and the Wilderness”



Stories of survival have always captured the imagination of human beings. Reader’s Digest sold millions of copies with its monthly feature “Drama in Real Life” – stories that recaptured incredible adventures of survival – as a boy growing up I couldn’t wait to read them - stories that were short enough to keep in the bathroom magazine rack, but exciting enough to keep you there.

But then reality TV came along and took our fascination to a whole new level with shows like *Survivor*, *Survivorman*, *Man Versus Wild*, - shows where people actually go into the wilderness on purpose and test themselves against the forces of nature. My favorite is *Man Versus Wild* where the former British Special Forces operative Bear Grylls parachutes into some forbidden, remote wilderness and has to find his way out with nothing but his wit, a shoe lace, and a couple of paper clips– even his name sounds like an adventure waiting to happen...Bear Grylls.

But my boys and I love watching this show – because in order to survive, he always has to do something disgusting...biting the head off a snake or eating cockroach “*which, if you didn’t know it, are a wonderful source of protein*”. My wife, on the other hand, can’t stand it because she sort of over identifies with the guys wife = “*That’s disgusting! Who would ever kiss a guy with snake breath and bugs in his teeth?*” But then he’ll have to take his shirt off so he can make a floatation device – and all of a sudden she’s not so grossed out...and I have to remind her that he still has snake breath.

But it’s good to know what to do when you find yourself in the wilderness. And, of course, that’s not only true physically, but it’s true spiritually as well. In fact, maybe more so – because I imagine very few of will ever have to survive a physical wilderness – but I will guarantee you – everyone in this room will go through a spiritual wilderness at some point in their life

And if we are going to become the people God wants us to be we have to come to terms with the wilderness ...and by that I mean difficult circumstances, times when you feel isolated and far from God, or when you go through situations that are difficult to understand.

Now, the wilderness isn’t really something that should surprise us - although certain people seem to think that if we are Christians - if we go to church - if we have enough faith - somehow things should work out the way we expect. And when life seems to click, and everything goes the way we expect we say - “Praise Jesus – isn’t God good!”

But what happens when the wilderness encroaches...what happens when a sandstorm hits? Because, somehow, somewhere along the way, a lot of us have gotten it in our heads or into our theology, that when something bad happens to us, something difficult, something hard—when we go through a wilderness time in our lives—when we hit a patch of dry ground, this

somehow means God has abandoned us; or is punishing us; or that God doesn't exist, or if God does exist, He just doesn't care.

Now, the Israelite people had a very different perspective. Maybe that's because they lived surrounded by literal wilderness. They lived out their lives against the backdrop of a blistering, landscape. They couldn't forget about the harshness of life, and the dryness of the desert. It marched right up to the Jordan. It surrounded Jerusalem. When the winds came up, wilderness dust stung their eyes. When they looked out over the landscape - that is what they saw—wilderness.

And not just any wilderness.

This was the same wilderness God had used to fulfill His purpose for them. Out of the wilderness had come their prophets: Elijah, Amos, Jeremiah. Out of the wilderness comes John the Baptist preparing the way for Jesus.



Here are some pictures of the Judean wilderness (on screens).

There is the mountain where tradition has it that Jesus was tempted (Mount of Temptation). There's nothing much there—blisteringly hot during the day....freezing at night.

But, the Hebrew people had come to terms with the wilderness. It was a part of life and it was also an important part of their history. An entire generation in the book of Exodus wandered for 40 years—where?—not through the Burchart Gardens, not through an arboretum, but in the wilderness.

And for the Israelites the wilderness wasn't just a story of survival – it was a story of transformation. Because more often than not, people who emerge from the wilderness are different people than when they went in. And the reason is because the wilderness will expose your heart – it will reveal a heart that refuses to see God in the difficulties of life and becomes parched by the dust of life – or, it can reveal a heart that can trust God regardless of its surroundings

And so the question becomes – how will you emerge from your wilderness?

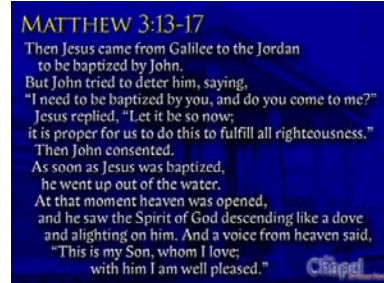
Will you allow the desert to cause your heart to wither and dry up, or will you continue to find life in God when everything around you lays barren?

Let's turn to our text, because it too, is a wilderness story – and it's there to teach us something – not only about Jesus, but about ourselves.

Now before we look at the story, we'll need to back up a little – because we'll never understand how Jesus survived the wilderness without first understanding the story of his baptism.

Dan taught this last week

Matthew 3:16-17 – *“After his baptism, as Jesus came up out of the water, the heavens were opened and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and settling on him. And a voice from heaven said, “This is my beloved Son, and I am fully pleased with him.”*



It is a statement of love, affirmation, intimacy, and call. This is Jesus' identity. Loved by God, chosen and affirmed. And then, after this Divine statement of love notice what happens - Jesus is driven into the wilderness by the Spirit of God to be tempted by the devil.

And, again, not just to any wilderness. **It is into the exact same wilderness where the Hebrew people in Exodus lived out the latter part of their forty year wandering.** And the Spirit is not driving Jesus into the wilderness arbitrarily – because there is always a purpose to the wilderness.

There was a purpose for Jesus' wilderness experience. And the purpose for Jesus, in this instance, is a call. He was going to go into the wilderness to relive the Exodus wilderness experience of His people—but he's going to do it in a whole new way—he'll do it by TRUSTING IN GOD'S LOVE FOR HIM MORE THAN IN THE WILDERNESS THAT SURROUNDED HIM.

Now remember, Matthew is writing for a Jewish audience – and he's going to draw some very clear parallels between their wilderness experience and the one Jesus is about to enter.

Jesus is driven into the wilderness for 40 days; the Hebrew people, as we said, wandered in the wilderness for 40 years... and each wilderness experience is accompanied by a series of temptations, but the difference is that Jesus is going to deal with the wilderness from a position of trust, he's going to confront temptation from a standpoint of strength rather than weakness.

Now, if you know the story, you may remember that the Hebrew people had trouble trusting God when they were in the wilderness. God sets them free from being slaves to Pharaoh. He provides a way of escape through the Red Sea, and they walk to safety on dry land to the other side. And there's a clear parallel to this event and Jesus' baptism.

When Pharaoh's army tries to follow God's people through the sea, God closes the waters over them and Pharaoh's army drowns. The Hebrew people are free! God is showing them:

You are chosen,
 You are loved,
 You are free,

And in all these miraculous events, God is revealing himself as the source of their provision and the one in whom they can place their trust. So it's great!
 They celebrate the first day!

But it only takes a few days more before the people start focusing on the wilderness that surrounds them instead of the mighty demonstration of God's love and deliverance. And the test is whether they will continue to trust God in the middle of a barren land.

And they don't do well on the test.

They begin to complain – and their complaining is nothing more than a sort of passive-aggressive way of saying *"We don't trust God - he gave us his word that he would take us to land of abundance, but where is it? We've been here for a couple of weeks, where is it God?"* They decided that they don't like the wilderness one little bit, and after years of longing and crying for freedom, they cry out again, *"We want to go back! We'd rather go back to our slavery than stay in the desert."*

And they break God's heart.

They refuse to trust His in love and provision for them. Instead, they were looking around at the wilderness and, as a result, an entire generation failed the wilderness test - F minus -zero.

But now, like the Hebrews centuries earlier, Jesus is led by God into the wilderness. And what Jesus is going to do is to relive, and undo, and transform the wilderness experience of the Israelites into an A+ kind of experience. This is the Divine Surprise—the undoing of distrust in the loving nature of God—Jesus will do the wilderness right...he will trust God for his people

He will show them – and show us- how it was meant to be done.

So how does He do this? What's His secret?

His secret is that He goes into the desert completely confident of whose He is. He is God's beloved son, chosen, precious, called, and a pleasure to His Father—an identity stated at the time of His baptism and known by Him from the inside out. If you had a wilderness experience, this is all you would need to put in it—your identity as loved beyond your wildest imagination by a God who never changes...a God who is loving and good.

You see, that identity of being loved and chosen is MORE real to Jesus than the wilderness that surrounds Him. He does what the Hebrew people, way back in Exodus, wandering in the wilderness could never do; because they didn't believe that God cared - they didn't know who God was. They didn't have the security and strength of their identity as God's chosen and beloved ingrained in them in such a way that they could overcome the wilderness.

We have to come to terms with the wilderness. And the only way we can do that is to know that when we find ourselves in the desert and God seems far away, it is not that we have been abandoned. But,

- It's to know that the wilderness is part of the package for the spiritual life, a training ground that teaches us that even when we are surrounded by desert, God is still faithful and we are still loved.

- If we can learn in the wilderness - to tune into that voice that came to Jesus at His baptism, the voice that declares our identity - and if we can know and believe the truth, that this is who we are – loved by a God who is always good - we will be well on our way to overcoming any temptation or wilderness experience that might come our way.

Let's look at this from Matthew chapter 4

Verse 1 tells us = that Jesus is led into the wilderness where he spends the next 40 days alone fasting and praying.

Again – it's important to see that this is time of isolation and physical barrenness is a result of the Spirit's leading. I think sometimes we're tempted to think that if we end up in the desert it's because we must have taken a wrong turn somewhere – we must have missed God's will (and, of course, sometimes we do) – but being in the desert isn't always the result of a wrong turn – sometimes it's exactly the place where God has led us.

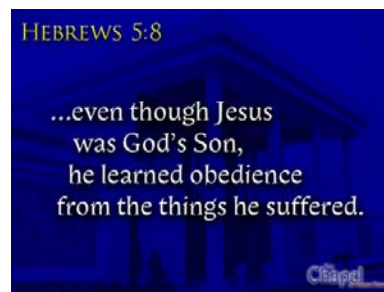


Dr Robert Clinton – one of the foremost authorities on leadership development and the spiritual life – says that in all of his years of study and research on how God forms people - and leaders in particular – he has never (and he emphasizes never) never found a leader - from Moses to Billy Graham - who did have to go through the test of isolation – who didn't have to face the wilderness alone. It is indispensable for spiritual formation and leadership development...even for Jesus.

Now you say – “Wait a minute. Jesus was the Son of God – what did he have to learn? He didn't have to prove anything to anybody.”

But there is an interesting verse in Hebrews 5:8 that says that ***“...even though Jesus was God's Son, he learned obedience from the things he suffered.”***

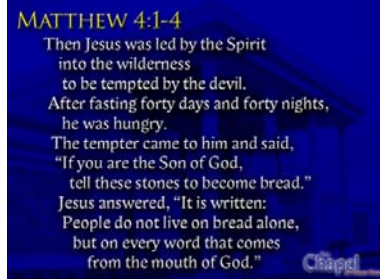
Now, of course, this doesn't suggest that Jesus was ever disobedient to his Father in any way – Jesus is the innocent Lamb of God. But as Griffith Thomas suggests there is a difference between innocence and virtue. *“Innocency is life untested, while virtue is innocency tested and triumphant.”* Jesus always possessed the disposition of obedience, but for him to possess the virtue of obedience, he had to be tested.



And the theme throughout these temptations he's about to face is the question of what kind of Son is Jesus going to be? *How are you going to use your identity, Jesus – and how are you going to use your power in the world?*

So into the desert he goes with the Devil close behind.

And notice where Satan begins - he goes right for Jesus' identity and tries to make Him doubt it. ***If you are the Son of God...*** As the winds come up, and the dust stings Jesus' eyes, and the heat of the sun beats down on His head the devil whispers, ***If you are the Son of God, turn these stones to bread.*** (Matthew 4:3)



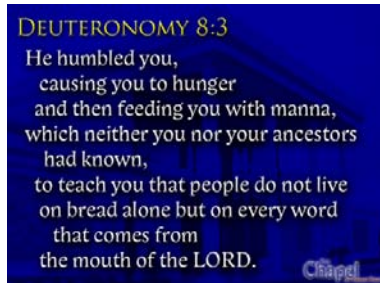
In other words, "Are you really who God says you are. If you are, why don't you prove it?"

If you are the Son of God, prove it, turn these stones to bread.

And the Q here is: Will Jesus use his power to bring supernatural immediate relief to himself and others? *"Jesus, if you have the power to turn to turn stone to bread – then why should you or anyone ever have to go hungry again? Just fix the problem here and now! After all, isn't that what God is supposed to do. Here's a need- meet it and people will never doubt who you are."*

But, Jesus knows the Scriptures! He knows that when the Hebrew people in Exodus were in the wilderness they demanded bread. Yet even when God gave them bread, manna as it was called; they still couldn't trust...it wasn't enough.

So, Jesus says to Satan,
"WONDER" Bread isn't enough. You don't live by bread alone, but by every word that comes out of the mouth of God. (Deuteronomy 8:3)



This is a quote from Deuteronomy—from the wilderness wanderings of the Hebrews.

It's not about proving, it's about trusting. In other words, you live by trusting God's word to you about who you are, and the last word that God has just spoken to Jesus is what?

You are my beloved son.

Even in the wilderness, Jesus knows this. It's enough to sustain Him. When you know who you are; when you know you are loved by God, you can trust him with your life – even in the desert.

Again the Devil tempts Jesus.

And the enemy is very clever. Since Jesus just said that it was by every word that comes out of the mouth of God that we live, Satan turns the argument from a practical one to a theological one - and he starts quoting scripture.

He takes Jesus to the top of temple in Jerusalem and starts quoting Psalm 91

Throw yourself down from this height... (Matthew 4:6) because after all the word of God says,
He will command his angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways, and they will lift you up in their hands so that you will not dash your foot against a stone. (Psalm 91: 11-12)



It's interesting that Satan stops before coming to the next verse of this Psalm which says, ***You will tread on the lion and the adder, the young lion and the serpent you will trample under foot.*** (Psalm 91:13)

Satan has long been associated with the serpent, and he just as soon not go there.

But why does Satan take him to the temple in Jerusalem? What's the temptation? Well the temple in Jerusalem was the center of what God was doing in the world. The temptation was for Jesus to become the center of the Jewish faith and prove to all God's people that he is who he really is.

And the Q is: Will Jesus use his supernatural power to make his identity obvious to people?

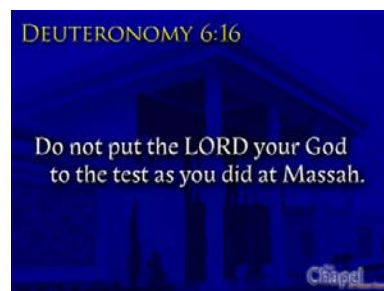
Satan was asking Jesus to throw Himself down off of the top of the temple on Mt. Zion which was a 450-foot drop into the Kidron Valley, perhaps to fulfill a rabbinical saying that said that When the King Messiah reveals himself, then he will come and stand on the roof of the Holy Place.

By leaping down unharmed, Jesus would be saying
"TA DAH!" Here I am world! Miracle worker extraordinaire!

And by doing this He would prove His identity. But Jesus does a little trampling under foot instead. He quotes scripture back, again from the context of the desert wanderings of His people.

You shall not put the Lord your God to the test. (Deuteronomy 6:16)

This is what God told the Hebrews when they were demanding a sign. It's actually interesting to quote the full text from Deuteronomy which says,
Do not test the Lord your God as you did at Massah.
 (Deuteronomy 6:16)



Massah means "testing." Massah was the place where the people had complained and asked,
Is the Lord among us or not? (Exodus 17:7)

How many times have you asked that?
Are you here or not, God? Show me a sign!

The Hebrews cried out,
We need yet another sign in addition to the Red Sea parting, the manna, and the quail, the Pillar of Fire and the Cloud to prove that you are here.

Jesus answers Satan differently. In essence he says,
I don't need a sign. Trust God completely, regardless of what He does or does not do. You don't ever worship a sign—signs are short-lived. You worship God who is eternal.

Now the last temptation is a temptation not so much to prove His identity but for Jesus to deny it altogether.

It is a temptation for Jesus to essentially do what the Hebrew people did when they made a golden calf in the desert. Remember how Moses was gone for so long on the mountain and they began to feel abandoned. What did they do? They denied their identity as belonging to God; they choose another god. Satan says to Jesus,

Fall down and worship me, Jesus, and I will give you all the kingdoms of the world (Matthew 4:9)

Or my paraphrase is—

This is my kingdom, remember? I'm in charge here. They chose to listen to me instead of you – remember back in Ede? And they did the same thing in the wilderness - you call them your chosen people...HA...They couldn't even begin to trust you. What makes you think it will be any different now? But I think we can cut a deal - If you fall down and worship me—I'll get them to notice you. I'll get them to worship you as long as you do it my way..."

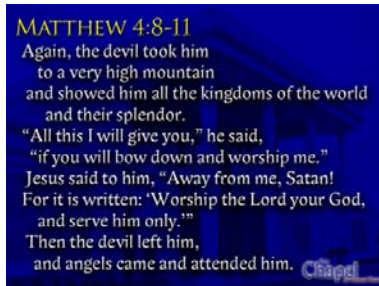
And Jesus answers

Be gone Satan. It is written: (and again His response comes right out of the Hebrew people's wanderings in the wilderness) ***you shall worship the Lord your God; serve only him*** (Matthew 4:10)

And through every temptation - Jesus' identity never faltered; His knowledge that He was God's beloved Son – called to fulfill God's purpose in the world - never wavered.

So Satan leaves, and scripture tells us that Angels came and strengthened Him after this ordeal. You see, angels did bear Jesus up—but not the way that Satan intended.

- Jesus would make bread to feed thousands later in His ministry, in God's timing not in Satan's.



- And Jesus would fulfill his call by – not by using his power to show off – but by being lifted up on a cross above the city, to be taken down dead and buried, and then raised by the power of God’s life-giving Spirit. That was the sign if ever there was one—not in Satan’s way but in God’s way.

And if we are going to survive the desert we have to do it God’s way.

In fact, I have a bit of confession to make, because something really bothered me this week as I was preparing this talk. It occurred to me as read these temptations over and over again – and as I looked back on my own wilderness experiences – I discovered that my tendency has been to align myself more with the Tempter in this story than with Jesus.



I say this based on what I do when I find myself in the wilderness. My pattern and motive to escape the desert seems to be filled with the same demands the Devil made of Jesus.

1. Turn these stones into bread – it’s the demand for the immediate. *Give me what I think I need and give it to me now. If I’m a child of God why should I have to endure this suffering?*
2. Or I’ll fall into the second temptation – the demand for a sign. *OK God if I have to go through this, at least give me a sign – let me see a miracle, because somehow I imagine that will prove once and for all that you’re real and that you are there for me.*
3. Or I go for the third temptation – maybe I can reach a deal with God. God deliver me from this ordeal and I’ll serve you forever. But in the end - this is nothing more than testing God. See, **Testing God** = is trying to get God to follow me – to do what I want. **Trusting God** = is me following God – serving him regardless – not because I need a sign, but because I know that I’m loved – and that he’s good and trustworthy even in, especially in, the wilderness.

And I’m learning that more day by day.

When I was 15 or 16 years old I went through a wilderness experience that deeply formed my spiritual life.

It was winter in Connecticut – a brutally cold and snowy winter. My dad had been out of work for some months. For more than 2 weeks, we had been living on soda-crackers and peanut butter – and then the furnace oil ran out. And as the house grew colder and our appetites grew hungrier, I began to get angry at God.

I remember being alone in my room and saying “God all these years my parents have served you, paid their tithes, took us to church, taught us to serve you, to trust in your word – and this is all the thanks we get? What’s the point in serving a God who promises to meet our needs and doesn’t come through?” I began to shout at God, “If that’s the kind of God you are I want

nothing to do with you!" And as I beat my pillow with my fists and sobbed my eyes out – something happened...under all the sobs, under all the anger...I heard the voice of God.

A voice I've only heard 2 or 3 times in my entire life. It wasn't audible, but it was as unmistakable as anything I've ever heard. And here is what he said – "*You belong to me.*" That was it...but it was enough. I can't tell you why, but it was all I needed to hear.

It's the voice Jesus heard, and it was enough.
And it's the voice you need to hear in the desert.

It's the voice that speaks in the hard moments, the struggles, the pain and the disappointments of life. It's the voice of God that says to us today – "Remember your identity. YOU BELONG TO Me. And I have loved you with an everlasting love."

I'm reminded of a story Mary Ann Bird wrote about when growing up called "The Whisper Test." She writes: I grew up knowing I was different, and I hated it. I was born with a cleft palate, and when I started school, my classmates made it clear to me how I looked to others: a little girl with a misshapen lip, crooked nose, lopsided teeth, and garbled speech.

When schoolmates asked, "What happened to your lip?" I'd tell them I'd fallen and cut it on a piece of glass. Somehow it seemed more acceptable to have suffered an accident than to have been born different. I was convinced that no one outside my family could love me.

There was, however, a teacher in the second grade whom we all adored -- Mrs. Leonard by name. She was short, round, happy -- a sparkling lady.

Annually we had a hearing test. ... Mrs. Leonard gave the test to everyone in the class, and finally it was my turn.

I knew from past years that as we stood against the door and covered one ear, the teacher sitting at her desk would whisper something, and we would have to repeat it back – usually it was something like the like "The sky is blue" or "Do you have new shoes?"

But I would wait for those words that God must have put into her mouth, those seven words that changed my life. Mrs. Leonard said, in her whisper, "I wish you were my little girl." And in that whisper I found the acceptance, love, and affirmation my young heart longed for – it's as if, in a way, I belonged especially to her.

I think God, too, has a whisper test. The still small voice that whispers "You are loved and you belong to me." Can you hear it? Can you believe in it more than the arid landscape that surrounds you?

God whispers to you,
"You are my beloved one."

When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and when you pass through the rivers, they will not sweep over you. When you walk through the fire, you will not be burned; the flames will not set you ablaze. (Isaiah 43:2)

"You belong to me."

ISAIAH 43:2

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Chapel