

This Message was prepared by Rev. Pamela Short for the People of Prayer of the Tontogany Presbyterian Church for the first Sunday of Lent in the year of our LORD two thousand and nineteen. It is based on the following scriptures:

Deuteronomy 26:1-11

26:1 When you have come into the land that the LORD your God is giving you as an inheritance to possess, and you possess it, and settle in it,

26:2 you shall take some of the first of all the fruit of the ground, which you harvest from the land that the LORD your God is giving you, and you shall put it in a basket and go to the place that the LORD your God will choose as a dwelling for his name.

26:3 You shall go to the priest who is in office at that time, and say to him, "Today I declare to the LORD your God that I have come into the land that the LORD swore to our ancestors to give us."

26:4 When the priest takes the basket from your hand and sets it down before the altar of the LORD your God,

26:5 you shall make this response before the LORD your God: "A wandering Aramean was my ancestor; he went down into Egypt and lived there as an alien, few in number, and there he became a great nation, mighty and populous.

26:6 When the Egyptians treated us harshly and afflicted us, by imposing hard labor on us,

26:7 we cried to the LORD, the God of our ancestors; the LORD heard our voice and saw our affliction, our toil, and our oppression.

26:8 The LORD brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with a terrifying display of power, and with signs and wonders;

26:9 and he brought us into this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey.

26:10 So now I bring the first of the fruit of the ground that you, O LORD, have given me." You shall set it down before the LORD your God and bow down before the LORD your God.

26:11 Then you, together with the Levites and the aliens who reside among you, shall celebrate with all the bounty that the LORD your God has given to you and to your house.

Psalms 91:1-2, 9-16

91:1 You who live in the shelter of the Most High, who abide in the shadow of the Almighty,

91:2 will say to the LORD, "My refuge and my fortress; my God, in whom I trust."

91:9 Because you have made the LORD your refuge, the Most High your dwelling place,

91:10 no evil shall befall you, no scourge come near your tent.

91:11 For he will command his angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways.

91:12 On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.

91:13 You will tread on the lion and the adder, the young lion and the serpent you will trample under foot.

91:14 Those who love me, I will deliver; I will protect those who know my name.

91:15 When they call to me, I will answer them; I will be with them in trouble, I will rescue them and honor them.

91:16 With long life I will satisfy them, and show them my salvation.

Romans 10:8b-13

10:8b "The word is near you, on your lips and in your heart" (that is, the word of faith that we proclaim);

10:9 because if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.

10:10 For one believes with the heart and so is justified, and one confesses with the mouth and so is saved.

10:11 The scripture says, "No one who believes in him will be put to shame."

10:12 For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; the same Lord is Lord of all and is generous to all who call on him.

10:13 For, "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved."

Luke 4:1-13

4:1 Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness,

4:2 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.

4:3 The devil said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread."

4:4 Jesus answered him, "It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone.'"

4:5 Then the devil led him up and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world.

4:6 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.

4:7 If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours."

4:8 Jesus answered him, "It is written, 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.'"

4:9 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,

4:10 for it is written, 'He will command his angels concerning you, to protect you,'

4:11 and 'On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.'"

4:12 Jesus answered him, "It is said, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'"

4:13 When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time.

Our Bible story for today
takes us into the wilderness;
into the struggle;
some might even say into the battle.
It takes us back to the days of the Exodus
and moves us forward toward the cross of Christ.
Some may find it disturbing;
others full of hope.
I think there is strength and wisdom in it that may serve us well on our Lenten journey and beyond.

The story comes on the heels of Jesus' baptism.
In his baptism, Jesus hears the voice from heaven say, "You are my Son, the Beloved.
With you I am well pleased."
The truth of Jesus' identity is declared.
His place of belonging praised.

Likewise, Luke begins today's story by assuring us that Jesus is full of the Holy Spirit.
Luke's gospel pays special attention to the Holy Spirit.
The angel assures Mary that the Holy Spirit will come upon her.
Luke describes Elizabeth as "full of the Holy Spirit"
Likewise, he offers the same description of Zachariah, Elizabeth's husband,
just before he blesses their son, John.
And you may recall that this is spoken of Simeon:
"The Holy Spirit rested on him".

Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit into the wilderness where for forty days he was tempted by the devil.

While I very much like the idea of being filled with the Holy Spirit,
I don't much care for being led into the wilderness.
Though I have to admit the wilderness holds both terror and beauty.
For the Israelites,
the wilderness was a place of punishment and discipline;
but it was also a place of provision as God fed them day by day with manna.
It was a place of death,
as one by one the generation that rejected God's invitation into the promised land passed away.
Still, the wilderness was a place of healing and instruction and assurance that this particular part of their journey
would eventually end and they would be led into the land of milk and honey.

For some of us, the wilderness may be a workplace that feels dry and lifeless;
For others, the wilderness is unrelenting grief that chokes out all joy.
The wilderness can be a sort of dark night of the soul,
where it is impossible to feel God's presence
or sense God's hope.
Perhaps your journey with a disease has felt like a wilderness
Or maybe you have walked through a time of deep loneliness,
even in the midst of your marriage
or with your children bustling all around you.

I sometimes wonder if 21st century busyness is a type of wilderness,
where our culture chokes out spiritual growth and leaves us like tumble weeds without roots,
without identity.

Back to Baptism.

Remember that this story follows Jesus' baptism story where he is named God's Beloved.

In the Presbyterian understanding of baptism,
One of the chief functions of baptism is to be named
"beloved child of God."

We can be sure that the devil will attack our own identity as surely as he attacked Jesus.
You see the word "devil" comes from the word
"to slander, to accuse, to defame".

We can expect this slanderer to muddy up the name God has given us.

We can expect this accuser to make us doubt our true identity.

We can expect this defamer to insult us and mock us and disparage our truest self "Beloved".

*If you are the Beloved,
then your child would not have died.
If you are the Beloved,
you would have gotten that promotion
If you are the Beloved,
you would not be bullied on Facebook.*

Maybe you're a fraud after all.

The accuser will seek to erode your identity,
confuse or even convince you that you are not who God declares you to be;
that you simply are reduced
to your culture's expectations
or your family's generational sins
or your personal failures.

When I face temptation,
all I see before me is that one thing:
that one food
or that one slice of gossip
or that one nasty thought
or that one distraction
or that one worry
or that one greed
or that one snarky comeback.

An addict does not think about
the masses of bottles they have emptied
or the piles of needles they have pushed,
but instead about that one fix that calls to them,
that pulls them in the very moment.
After all it is only one... only one slice of something or other.

But we do not live by one slice alone,
nor by popularity
nor by pornography
nor by the accumulation of stuff
nor by revenge
nor by anxiety
nor by work
nor by alcohol
nor by fear
nor by independence
nor by stature
nor by pain
nor by self-absorption
nor by shame
But by every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD
And the word was and is and always will be
You are my beloved.
You are my beloved.
You are my beloved.

Beloved Is Where We Begin by Jan Richardson, *Circle of Grace*

If you would enter
into the wilderness,
do not begin
without a blessing.

Do not leave
without hearing
who you are:
Beloved,
named by the One
who has traveled this path
before you.

Do not go
without letting it echo
in your ears,
and if you find
it is hard
to let it into your heart,
do not despair.
That is what
this journey is for.

I cannot promise
this blessing will free you
from danger,
from fear,
from hunger

or thirst,
from the scorching
of sun
or the fall
of the night.

But I can tell you
that on this path
there will be help.

I can tell you
that on this way there will be rest.

I can tell you
that you will know
the strange graces
that come to our aid
only on a road
such as this,
that fly to meet us
bearing comfort
and strength,
that come alongside us
for no other cause
than to lean themselves
toward our ear
and with their
curious insistence
whisper our name:

Beloved. Beloved. Beloved

Now Beloved Child of God
Receive this blessing:
May the shadow of God's wings
Cover you in grace
Empower you in mercy
And surprise you with
Love, honor, holiness and peace
Now and for a thousand generations.
Amen

