

**Psalm 107:1-6, 35-36**  
**Luke 4:1-13**  
***“Pay Attention Out There”***

March 17, 2019  
Rev. David Pierce

We are one week into Lent this morning. This may not be good news to you. By definition, Lent is not sunny skies. Lent is not picnics at the beach and everything coming up roses. Lent is wilderness and desert. It is waking up to find you are not in the place you want to be, and you don't know how to get out. The air is parched. You get up and get going, because something tells you that if you stay put you'll waste away and die, but everywhere you look looks the same. It's a desert, with sand in every direction. You think you see water on the horizon, but it's just a mirage, your eyes playing tricks on you. You feel like you can't trust yourself at all. The world feels unpredictable, and not safe. Anyone know what it feels like to be in a place like that? Some of us have been in a place like that. Some of us are there now.

The people of New Zealand and of Christchurch are there right now. How did we get here? we heard their Prime Minister ask two days ago. Mass shootings and public violence are rare in our communities. We are open, accepting, affirming. This has never happened before—an attack on two Muslim mosques. People praying, and now 49 dead, dozens more injured. Life irreparably damaged. How did we get here? Desert.

Of course, the question doesn't always have to be, “How did we get here?” Go to a place often enough and you'll stop asking, “How did we get here?” and you'll find yourself asking instead, “How do we keep coming back here?” That's the question we now hear being asked in our country—from Pittsburgh to Lakeland to Aurora to Newtown. How do we keep coming back here?

I tell myself that the answer must be that we don't know any other way. That we don't know how not to kill, how not to hate, how not to love our laws more than we love our lives, how not to be threatened by one another so we don't have to fear one another. It's the only reasonable explanation for why we keep coming back to the desert. Because surely, if we did know how to go another way, we would. Wouldn't we?

In speaking of Jesus this morning, did you notice what Luke said about him? That being full of the Holy Spirit, he returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the desert wilderness for forty days. In putting it this way, all the English translations make it

sound like Jesus chose the desert for himself. Like having just been baptized by John in the Jordan, he now decides to go off and do what every baptized person does—spend 40 days in the desert wilderness. It's not exactly a trip to Disney World following a Super Bowl win. And I'm sure it's not what Joe and Sarah have in mind for Laura after today. Who chooses the desert? The answer is: no one does. Not even Jesus. Luke says he was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, but it's Mark in his version of this same story who says, "And the Spirit drove him out into the wilderness." It's a rather descriptive Greek word: εκβαλλω. From εκ, meaning "out," and βαλλω, meaning, "to throw." In other words, the Spirit of God doesn't just lead Jesus in the wilderness. She throws him out into it. Like a parent whose idea of helping their child learn to swim by tossing them in the deep end of the pool, she puts him in the backseat of the car, drives him out to the desert, opens the door and tosses him out. Sink or swim, you're baptized now, you'll figure it out.

Ever since this story was first put in print, though, it has raised a critical question: if the Spirit of God can forcibly throw Jesus to the desert, what else can we say the Spirit has done? Was it the Spirit who caused the tornado to destroy the whole town? Was it the Spirit who caused the illness that caused my loved one to die? Was it the Spirit who told the madman to shoot up the mosque, the school? On the other hand, was it the Spirit who kept me safe from the tornado, healed my loved one, and spared some from getting shot by the madman?

It's hard to know how God works in the world and in our lives. But if the way the Spirit throws Jesus out into the desert causes us to question the way God works, how Jesus responds to life in the desert may provide us with an exact answer to the way God works.

Out in the desert with only the Devil to keep him company, Jesus is tempted to do three things. The first is to change stones into bread. Boy, wouldn't that be great. The desert is an empty garden. There's no food to be found anywhere; nothing but rocks. What could be more magical and helpful than to turn them all into bread?

Last night I sat around the fire with 16 of our students who had spent their day volunteering with Mobile Loaves and Fishes, handing out bag lunches to our hungry neighbors in Woonsocket. They also worked the soup kitchen line in Pawtucket. To sit and listen to them talk about their experience, you hear the compassion in their voices, but you

also hear their struggle to understand a world where the needs far outrun our ability to meet them. In such a world, where do you start? How do you decide who should and should not get your help? If only we could turn stones into bread, then we wouldn't have to decide. We could feed everyone. But Jesus says no, that's not how God works. God does not want to give us only bread, for bread alone will satisfy us for a time, but we'll have to keep going back for more. And we can't afford to keep going back. Remember, we're living in the desert. Instead, what's required is that learn to sacrifice, to share, to live in mutuality with others, to take only what we need. This is the way of God, and the only way to be truly satisfied.

If the first temptation Jesus resists in the desert is the temptation to entertain, to impress the Devil by doing a magic trick, the second temptation he resists is that of absolute power. "To you I will give authority over all the kingdoms of the world, if you will but worship me," the Devil tells him. Mahatma Gandhi once said there are 7 dangers to human virtue, and among them are religion without sacrifice and politics without principle. That's what Jesus is up against here. To be able to command an army, to get to tell people, go there, and they go, to have power and position, to be on top all alone without ever having to sacrifice for it. Jesus says no, I don't want it. I am reminded of what the South African cleric and anti-apartheid activist Allan Boesak once said. That when we go before God, God will ask, "Where are your wounds?" And we will say, "I have no wounds." And God will say, "Was there nothing worth fighting for?"

In this season of Lent, we find ourselves standing with Jesus in the desert, with few protections from the world. I suppose it should be said that we don't know how we got here, and that if we could, we would run and hide from it. But we can't. Because like Jesus, the Spirit of God is upon us, and that Spirit seems to have other plans for us. So here we are. We could do what so many are doing this Lent. We could give up chocolate, eat more broccoli, and see if that doesn't work to improve the world. We could try to turn stones into bread. But where are we ever going to get enough stones? We could double-down on kindness. It couldn't hurt. Or, or we could just stick to the desert, and with the One who promises, I have come that you may have life, and have it abundantly. Amen.