

“Turning Back to God”  
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III  
John Knox Presbyterian Church – Indianapolis, Indiana  
Lent I – March 10, 2019

**Luke 4: 1-13**

When was the last time you were faced with temptation? One way that many people observe the Season of Lent is by giving up something for these forty days – say a particular food, or logging on to social media, or some other habit they wish to break from. Maybe you’re doing that now, or have done that in the past. Or maybe you’ve been on a diet, seeking to lose some weight, and you’ve given up certain foods which you know cause you to gain weight.

If you fall into any of those categories, then you certainly know temptation. You arrive for a dinner at a friend’s house, and your favorite dessert is being served. You are at a meeting with colleagues, and there’s the tray of cheese and crackers and breakfast sweets staring you right in the face. You see a friend logging onto Facebook or Instagram, and you wonder what your friends are posting about themselves – or about you! It can be very hard to overcome temptation in such circumstances.

But temptation is also alive and well in other facets of our lives. You’re studying for a final exam at the end of the semester, and you hear through a friend that someone has a copy of the test. You need a good grade on this final to maintain your class ranking, so that you can be in the best position for college selection and so on. How tempting is that? What do you do?

Or maybe you are walking down the street and you notice an envelope to the side of the walkway. You pick it up, and inside you find \$500 in cash. You look on the front of the envelope, and there is a name which you don’t recognize. You consider all the bills you have at home, all the things your kids want or need, all the ways this money could help you at this moment. Then you look at the name on the front of the envelope, and wonder how you might find out who it is. But you also have these pressing needs. How tempting is that? What do you do?

Our scripture this morning is a biblical reminder that even God’s own Son is not immune to temptation. It is also our reminder that in Jesus’ forty days in the wilderness, we are given an example which reminds us whose we are in the first place, and how we are called to turn back to God when we are faced with temptation.

It is immediately before these days in the wilderness that Jesus is baptized with the Holy Spirit by John in the Jordan. This is very important for the rest of the passage. Throughout these forty days and final three temptations by the devil, Jesus is not utterly alone in his struggle, but “filled with the Spirit” of God, so he might have the strength and courage to do God’s will in the face of such evil.

In each of these three temptations, we see Jesus saying no in the words of those who have gone before him. In the first case, the devil offers him something pretty basic and useful in Jesus' condition: bread. Instead of continuing to be famished, Jesus could simply turn a stone lying beside him into bread, and satisfy his gnawing hunger. But in making this offer, the devil forces Jesus to defend who he claims to be: "If you are the Son of God, [then] command this stone to become a loaf of bread."

How many times have we been tempted by our world to enjoy a little more bread than we know is good for us? We own so much, eat so much, consume so much, buy so much. It's all around us, and we figure that a little more won't hurt us. We often say "yes" when we know we should say "no."

Jesus responds to this temptation by reminding us of the time the Israelites were wandering in their own wilderness. They had complained and begged for food to sustain them on their journey, and God provided for their need in the manna each morning. But Moses reminded them, and Jesus reminds us, that "One does not live by bread alone," but solely by the Word of God itself. Jesus says who he is by saying no to temptation.

Next, the devil takes him up to a high place, showing him all the kingdoms of the earth. There before them are all the kings, queens, rulers, governments, and emperors who hold the power of the world's people. With this in their sight, the devil says, "Here it is: all the power in the world. If you will kneel before me, it will all be yours. What is your choice?"

Power is something we can certainly relate to. We admire people who have it, and yearn for the power others hold. Many of us just want the power to live our lives the way we want to. Too many times in history, individuals have sought too much unrivaled power, and it has ruined the lives of too many people. But power can also do a lot of good, and to hold that kind of power would not be such a bad thing.

Jesus responds to this temptation by reminding us again of the Israelites and their failed attempt at worshipping God. While Moses was up on that mountain all those days, they thought it might be good to build an idol on which they could focus all their worship. This, in turn, brought on the wrath of God, and prompted Moses to say, "Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him." Power - in whatever form, good or bad - is not to be worshipped. Only God holds power, and all other power is futile in comparison. Jesus says who he is by saying no to temptation.

Finally, the devil takes Jesus to a specific and symbolic place - the temple at Jerusalem. The devil must think this will take the cake. Here is religion, in its purest form, and the devil wants Jesus to use it to prove who he is. "If you are the Son of God, then throw yourself down from here and let the angels save you, for that is what is written in the psalms."

This too is something we like to see today. Our culture wants to see religion displayed in dazzling ways. We want to witness God's grace through healings, polished performances, and large crowds of people filling our sanctuaries. If someone's faith is real, then you must be able to jump off a cliff

and be saved by the angels. If someone's faith is real, then they will be healed of their cancer, illness, or disease. Religion for us is just one more way to get the good things we want.

But Jesus says no, this is not the way to know who God is. The Israelites certainly tested their God throughout those forty years, and Moses warned them not to put God to the test. Likewise, Jesus says, "Do not put the Lord your God to the test," and the devil finally departs him. Jesus says who he is by saying no to temptation.

Barbara Brown Taylor believes that this story from Jesus' life helps us recognize our own wilderness experiences. She writes: *Maybe it just looked like a hospital waiting room to you, or the sheets on a cheap motel bed after you got kicked out of your house, or maybe it looked like the parking lot where you couldn't find your car on the day you lost your job. It may even have been a kind of desert in the middle of your own chest, where you begged for a word from God and heard nothing but the wheezing bellows of your own breath.*

*Wildernesses come in so many shapes and sizes that the only way you can really tell you are in one is to look around for what you normally count on to save your life and come up empty. No food. No earthly power. No special protection – just a Bible-quoting devil and a whole bunch of sand.*

*Needless to say, this is not a situation many of us seek. Most of us, in fact, spend a lot of time and money trying to stay out of it; but I don't know anyone who succeeds at that entirely or forever. Sooner or later, every one of us will get to take our own wilderness exam, our own trip to the desert to discover who we really are and what our lives are really about . . .*

*But it would be a mistake for me to try to describe your wilderness exam. Only you can do that, because only you know what devils have your number, and what kinds of bribes they use to get you to pick up. All I know for sure is that a voluntary trip to the desert this Lent is a great way to practice getting free of those devils for life – not only because it is where you lose your appetite for things that cannot save you, but also because it is where you learn to trust the Spirit that led you there to lead you out again, ready to worship the Lord your God and serve no other all the days of your life* (*"The Wilderness Exam," February 21, 2010, <http://day1.org/1756-the-wilderness-exam>*).

We all experience the wilderness at some point in our lives. It might be the wilderness of financial stress and anxiety. It might be the wilderness of grief and deep loss. It might be the wilderness of straying from God and feeling disconnected from our Creator. It might be the wilderness of broken relationships, dysfunctional families, or feeling lost and alone in this great, big world.

Maybe you have been in such wildernesses in your life. Maybe you are in such a wilderness now. If you've been in one before, likely one marker of how you got out of that wilderness was a reconnection with God which turned you back toward God's purpose in your life. It could have been a mountain-top experience, like what Debbie talked about last week with Jesus'

Transfiguration. It could have been a friend making you feel loved and valued. It could have been anything – but whatever it was, it helped you stop, turn, and reorient your life according to God’s purpose for you.

I think it’s safe to say that I experienced such a moment last week when I attended a CREDO Conference, sponsored by our denomination’s Board of Pensions. CREDO means “I believe,” and it brought together 24 pastors from across the country to spend a week with trained faculty, who guided us through reflection on our whole lives: spiritual, vocational, financial, physical and emotional health. It provided a space for us to assess where our wildernesses are, and where we are being nourished as children of God. And with that knowledge, we were given the tools we need to implement a plan for ourselves moving forward in our lives of service.

There is much that I will share with you in the weeks and months to come. But one thing that struck me as I reflected on this passage and my experience at CREDO was the notion of whose I am. In other words, who I belong to. Throughout this passage from Luke, the devil tempts Jesus to prove whose he is by performing acts that will satisfy human desire. But Jesus will not be defined by that standard. Instead, Jesus claims whose he is by God’s acts of grace in the past. Jesus turns back to God because that is who he belongs to – now and forever.

As I wrote my Rule of Life, as we called it at CREDO, I recognized that I am already a beloved child of God – that is who I belong to. And in order to fulfill the mission of life that God has called me to, I desire to be attuned more closely to God’s calling through the Spirit. I don’t know if I’d been in a particular wilderness or not – probably the wilderness of routine. But after this experience at CREDO, I certainly understand more clearly how I am called to turn back to God, not only in the Season of Lent, but for every day I am blessed to be on this earth.

What wilderness are you living in? What moment or experience do you need to help you turn back to God in the face of the world’s temptations? How might you be attuned to God’s loving presence today in a particularly meaningful way, so you might know whose you always have been, are, and will forever be: a beloved child of God?

Take heart, know that God loves you, and affirm your faith by turning back and saying yes to the Lord your God.

Thanks be to God. Amen.