**"Lessons from the Desert"**
A sermon by the Rev. Susie Bjork
Bay Shore Community Congregational Church – February 22, 2026
First Sunday in Lent – Lesson: Luke 4:1-13

Loving God, may your Holy Spirit guide us in this Lenten season and in all our wilderness wanderings. In times when the journey feels easy, as well as in more challenging moments, help us keep our hearts tuned to your love as we seek to travel in the Way of Jesus. Amen.

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Forty days is a long camping trip! And an even longer time to fast! Can you imagine hanging out in the Mojave without food (let alone a tent, sleeping bag, and cell phone signal)? How long would you last?

The real wilderness around the Jordan River is stunningly beautiful. But, like all wild places, it can also be unforgiving. The Dead Sea is called dead for a reason – it's too salty to sustain life. The desert wind can whip up blinding sand storms. Thunderstoms can bring heavy rainfall, hail, and flash-flooding. And the Negev desert is also home to wolves, jackals, hyenas, a large carnivorous cat called a caracal, and several species of venomous snakes. Wild places like this are both wondrous and dangerous, deserving of our awe and our respect.

So, what was Jesus thinking, I wonder? Did he go willingly or reluctantly? Why *did* the Spirit lead him out into the wilderness? Why was it necessary? Why couldn't he just get up from the Jordan River after his baptism and go on back to Nazareth and get to the work of ministry?

Now, forty days is probably symbolic – not a number meant to be taken literally. When we hear this story, we're supposed to remember the Israelites' forty years of wilderness wandering in Exodus as they moved from enslavement to liberation and covenant. Forty years was considered a complete generation. It illustrates to us that transformation takes time.

And so, for the gospel writers, forty days probably signifies a complete time of transformation for Jesus as he prepared for what was next. And, of course, this is why each year we observe these forty days of Lent (not counting Sundays) in preparation for Easter.

For Jesus, this time in the wilderness tested him, challenged him, and probably helped him clarify his sense of identity and purpose. Perhaps he emerged from the desert stronger and even more dedicated to the path before him. The wilderness had something to teach him.

Throughout life we find ourselves on similar journeys sometimes too, whether in the literal or metaphorical wilderness. Even a time of transition and change that we've chosen for ourselves (like a career change or moving to a new place) can still feel a little wild or uncertain at times. And sometimes we're thrown into a wilderness experience that takes us by surprise and is not of our choosing – an illness, a break-up, the loss of a loved one. Those unexpected life events (especially the biggies, but even the smaller ones too) can drag us into unfamiliar wild terrain.

Wilderness experiences can be collective experiences too. Just like individual change, collective change can be challenging too (even when it's a positive change). And some seasons of wilderness are more difficult: When our families or communities have to respond to a crisis or navigate a

challenging time. When episodes of violence erupt in our midst. When our institutions fall short of their mission. When society fails people. Civilization can feel pretty wild, uncertain, and dangerous sometimes.

In times like that we can understand the appeal of retreating to the actual wilderness. Even after he came back to town, Jesus would take off again now and then – not for forty days, but for a time of retreat and prayer. I get that.

The question is what do these wilderness journeys (whether chosen or unexpected) have to teach us?

We reflect on this story of Jesus' wilderness journey at the beginning of Lent, in part, because the lessons he learned in the desert apply to our lives too. The season of Lent invites us to take some intentional time to reflect on these lessons, put them into practice in our own lives, and see what new insights we might glean from them this year.

Luke has an interesting take on this story. Only Luke emphasizes that these three big temptations arise for Jesus at the end of his long fast. Luke tells us he was famished. And it is in that moment that the tempter calls to him.

That makes sense. He's hungry, exhausted, famished – not just physically, but also emotionally, mentally, even spiritually. He's spent. And sometimes it's when we're *spent* that those sneaky little voices creep in more easily – voices of temptation that make false promises in the face of real feelings of doubt, fear, frustration, struggle.

In this moment of utter exhaustion, Jesus hears a voice: "Look at that stone over there. Doesn't it look just like it could be a warm loaf of freshly baked bread – crusty and flaky on the outside, tender and fluffy on the inside? Can you smell the aroma? Mmmm… best when it's fresh out of the oven, don't you think? Wouldn't it be tasty with a little wild honey drizzled over the top, or fig jam, or a little olive oil and herb dip? Couldn't you make that fantasy a reality? Wouldn't that fill the void?"

Who knew the devil could sound like a Food Network star? Sounds tempting, doesn't it?

Jesus withstands this temptation, despite his hunger and fatigue. And he responds with a quote from Deuteronomy 8:3, "one does not live by bread alone – but by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord."

Now, I don't think that this temptation is primarily about food. That's the presenting circumstance. Of course, Jesus is hungry. And he is going to need to eat eventually. But, in this moment, Jesus faces the temptation to misuse power for personal satisfaction. I also think he's facing the temptation to find a quick fix.

We face that temptation too. We know we can't turn a stone into bread to satisfy our hunger, but sometimes we do desperately desire shorter, simpler solutions to complex problems. Why does treatment take so long? And will it work? Why is recovery so hard? When will this grief be at least tolerable? When will we learn to really listen to each other? Will we ever learn to truly coexist and share resources on this planet so everyone has what they need?

We long for something to fill the void we're feeling; to fix the problem we're experiencing. It's normal. It's human. It's nothing to be ashamed of.

But we also have to come to terms with the fact that sometimes a quick fix isn't possible. And we have to choose how to respond to that reality. Do we choose to trust that God is with us as we take the long road? Do we stay the course and step out in faith each day anyway, even though some days it's really tough?

Jesus was tempted to find a quick fix to satisfy his own temporary hunger. But, instead, he chose to devote his life to feeding others, sharing life and love with those he encountered, and helped nourish the world.

"Ok, so you can do without bread for a little while longer," the tempter ponders, "how about I offer you everything then. Have I got a deal for you! Take a look at this! All the kingdoms of this world; authority, power, control, lots of money, and all the glitz and glory that come with it. Forget Caesar, you're the emperor now, baby! Don't you want to sit on that throne? Don't you deserve that? You could do whatever you want – no consequences, no questions asked. All for the low, low price of worshiping me. Whattaya say?"

Now the devil sounds like a used car salesman or a late-night informercial.

But no sale. Jesus won't abandon his moral center and his faith in God. Again, he quotes Deuteronomy, "it is written, 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.'"

Power and control can be alluring, even for those who *don't* want to use their power for personal gain. It's tempting to think that the right leader can fix everything. I mean I'd rather have Jesus in charge than Caesar any day.

But life together is more complicated than that. And Jesus withstood this temptation because he wasn't looking for a throne. He wasn't looking for power *over* others. He knew that wouldn't fix anything. And that wasn't God's dream for the world. Instead, he invited everyone into participation and collaboration in building the Kingdom of God, the Kindom of God – which is centered in *shared* power, mutual service, compassionate care, peaceful coexistence, and just and loving ways of being together in *this* world.

I'm not even sure God's Kingdom has need of a throne. Maybe one day all the thrones of this world will be cast aside into the corner somewhere where they'll get dusty from lack of use. Instead, in God's Kingdom, I like to think we're invited to a big dining table with comfy seats for everyone and plenty of bread to go around (and maybe some fig jam).

"Third times a charm," thinks the tempter. "This time I'll give him a taste of his own medicine." "You like to quote scripture, I see." "Anyone can do that. Even me." "You could jump from this high ledge, you know. And Psalm 91 says that God's angels will catch you."

The devil thinks he can proof text. But not very successfully. This time the tempter takes the form of a mediocre Bible thumper. I mean who brings a Psalm to a Deuteronomy fight?

"Do not put the Lord your God to the test," Jesus says. Again, you guessed it, a quote from Deuteronomy.

I'm sure Jesus was tempted to test God's faithfulness. Don't we want proof sometimes? Proof that God is who we proclaim God to be? Proof that God is still with us in our lives; still faithful to this creation? Proof that love wins in the end? Some empirical data would sure be nice sometimes!

But faith is not proof. It's faith. It doesn't mean we have it all figured out. It's trust. It's with that deeper sense of knowing, even without all the data, even without seeing the whole picture, that we step out in faith each day.

We don't need to put God to the test. We don't need magic tricks and spectacles. We don't need to have all the proof. We just need to be open to the relationship: Open to the journey. See where it may lead. Trust that what we contribute in this life does matter. And that God receives us with grace, love, encouragement, and guidance each step of the way.

And, while we may not have all the data, there is certainly plenty of anecdotal evidence that living out God's call to love, walking in the way of Jesus, and offering our gifts for the good of the whole does make a difference. Lives are transformed. Healing happens. Love is experienced. It may not always be big and dramatic. But God's love is made real every day in so many ways.

Jesus didn't need to pitch himself off the temple to demonstrate God's love and faithfulness. He lived it daily.

Jesus was strengthened by this wilderness experience. It prepared him for the ministry that would come next. And gave him the resources to face the hardest parts of his journey.

This season of Lent invites us to reflect on Jesus' lessons from the desert and how our own wilderness journeys may have shaped and strengthened us too. As you do so, you might just find out that you are stronger than you think.

And keep your eyes peeled for God to faithfully show up in your daily life this Lent. It may not always be in the form of a quick fix, a display of power, or a dramatic rescue, but God's faithfulness persists: in quiet moments of reassurance; in friendship, community, and supportive people who care; in simple beauty; in deep joy and deep love that brings us back to life, even when we're famished.

Amen.