

Sermon for The First Sunday in Lent
Sunday, February 22, 2026
The Rev. Sukie Curtis

After my second year of seminary, (45 years ago!), I traveled with a group of seminarians and clergy to spend nearly a month at St. George's College in Jerusalem (where, in the very small world department, the Dean of St. George's at the time was married to Fred Edelen's Aunt Jane—a fact which has nothing at all to do with what follows!). The course we took was called "The Bible in its Setting," and as well as exploring the Old City of Jerusalem and surrounding areas, we ventured farther north into Galilee and south as far as the Red Sea. So we saw a lot of, and even spent some time sitting in and even camping in, what the Gospel reading calls "wilderness;" the Greek word means a deserted or desolate place.

Even from my brief experience in Israel/Palestine, I can assure you that this wilderness bears little resemblance to what we might think of as "wilderness" in New England, like the densely-treed "Hundred Mile Wilderness" along the AT through western Maine, except that both are wild. The Judean wilderness is mostly bare and brown, sometimes hilly, sometimes with cliffs fronting narrow gorges where a small stream trickles far, far below. Small clumps of green shrubby growth sparsely dot the landscape where there is enough water to support them.

In a few places, such as between Jerusalem and Jericho, ancient monasteries cling to cliffsides, some dating to the 5th and 6th centuries CE; one of them was built in the area traditionally associated with Jesus' temptation in the wilderness, the story we've just heard from Matthew's Gospel. (According to one website I found, "traveling to (this) monastery is a fun hike." I have a feeling that's not quite how Jesus thought of his journey into the wilderness.) The wilderness is an unforgiving landscape, AND a place where one gets stripped down to basics and encounters the presence of God.

Every year on the First Sunday in Lent, we hear about Jesus' temptation in the wilderness. All three synoptic gospels—that is, Matthew, Mark, and Luke—set the story of Jesus's temptation immediately after the story of his baptism. The scholar Diana Butler Bass describes this time as a "hinge" between Jesus' baptism and the death of John the Baptist, after which Jesus began his itinerant teaching and healing.

The Gospel of Mark tells us that "the Spirit drove Jesus out into the wilderness," compelled him; while Matthew and Luke, following a different tradition, tell us that Jesus was "led by the Spirit into the wilderness," in order to be tempted.

Since there were likely no eye-witnesses and certainly no video cameras or drones following Jesus, what do we imagine went on out there? What would this extended time—these 40 days, according to Mt. and Lk—what would time in a lonely, desolate place have meant for Jesus? Hunger, thirst, cold at night, and being laid bare...

A few weeks ago in her sermon, Amanda shared parts of a talk by American theologian Howard Thurman, urging us to “listen for the sound of the genuine” within ourselves. “Don’t be deceived,” Thurman continued in a section that Amanda did not read, “Don’t be deceived and thrown off by all the noises that are a part even of your dreams (and) your ambitions.”

I imagine Jesus in this barren landscape “listening for the sound of the genuine” in himself as he tried to understand and clarify just what God was calling him to do. And for Jesus, that “listening for the sound of the genuine” would not have been primarily about self-actualization or becoming an authentic individual, as we might think of it today.

Rather, for Jesus the “sound of the genuine” would certainly have encompassed the heart of the Jewish law: “Love God with your whole heart and love your neighbor as yourself,” and the heart of the Jewish prophets, who again and again called the people of God to remember God’s vision for the earth shared justly, equally among all, crying against injustice, on behalf of the poor and the marginalized.

In addition to the law and the prophets Jesus also carried the sufferings of his people in Galilee. Remember that the Jewish people were an occupied people, very much under the thumb of the Roman Empire. The people Jesus knew and loved and lived among were struggling under higher taxes and increasing debt; small farmers lost their land to debt, becoming tenant farmers or day laborers, characters we often hear about in Jesus’ parables.

So here is Jesus out by himself in a desolate place, carrying all of this within him: the Law and the Prophets, and the sufferings of people in Galilee, and he’s “listening for the sound of the genuine” in himself, for the voice of God, for the prompting of God’s Spirit:

- Should he carry on in the footsteps of John the Baptist?
- Should he take up arms against Rome like the Zealots?
- Just what was he called to do and to be? How was he to Love God and neighbor?

“Don’t be deceived or thrown off by all the noises that are a part even of your dreams (and) your ambitions,” Thurman wrote. In the wilderness Jesus is sifting through the noise, testing various scenarios of response to God’s call.

The tempter’s scenarios are like exaggerations, caricatures almost, of Jesus’ sifting through options:

- Turn stones into bread and be adored and worshiped for feeding destitute people! (That would have been very enticing as Jesus himself was famished.)
- Why not throw yourself off the Temple pinnacle and see if God rescues you?
- And how about ALL of this territory as far as the eye can see—wouldn’t you like to be in charge of it all? To have your name affixed to it all, in the style of Tiberias and Herod?

Saying YES to any of these possibilities would have been *all about self-aggrandizement*, all about making a name for himself without regard to loving neighbor as oneself or to serving the vision of God’s earth shared equally among all.

Instead, by saying NO to these enticements, Jesus was in fact saying YES to another way, to a very different way:

- YES to being dependent on God and others and the sharing of bread in order to have enough to eat
- YES to being vulnerable without any special protection, even if that meant dying on a cross
- YES to following a path quite different from the ways of the world, where one individual or a privileged group has power and dominion over multitudes.

So where does this leave *us*—we who seek to be followers of Jesus in a radically different time and place from that of Jesus and his followers in Galilee under Roman occupation? When we “listen for the sound of the genuine in ourselves,” I’m guessing that we do so with a more individualistic, 21st century mindset. So perhaps this story can remind us first of all that we are not only individuals seeking fulfilment and self-actualization; the wider context of the world needs to concern us, too.

We too carry within us traditions that shape us; we too might remember that at heart we are called to love God and to love our neighbors as ourselves; to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with our God; to do our best to see that God’s abundance, earth’s bountiful yet finite resources, are equally protected and equally shared.

We too can seek not to be “deceived or thrown off by all the noises that are a part even of our dreams and our ambitions,” or at least to look with suspicion on those things which might run counter to loving God and to loving our neighbors as ourselves, and to be skeptical of actions and choices that impede rather than further the vision of God’s earth, God’s abundance, God’s provisions cared for and shared justly among all.

In 21st century North America our neighbors may include the vulnerable and the destitute, as well as refugees and asylum-seekers; and our neighbors include endangered plant and animal species whom we have a chance to help save; our neighbors are people nearby without the resources to protect themselves against wild weather, heat, fire, or flood; and our neighbors are millions of people far from us who will be impacted by the climate changing through no fault of their own.

Our callings as followers of Jesus are at the same time uniquely specific to each of us and share a common foundation. Perhaps the sound of the genuine expressed within each of us is more like a unique variation on a theme than like a distinctly original composition (though we might like to think otherwise!). What we share is the foundation that Jesus also knew: the call to love God, and to love our neighbors as ourselves, and the prophets’ call to hold fast to God’s vision of the earth’s abundance cherished, protected, and shared equally among all, and the power of God to do it.
AMEN.