

“Finding Strength When in the Wilderness”
March 9, 2025

Deuteronomy 26:1-11
Luke 4:1-13

The church historian, Diana Butler Bass, recently said that “Lent can be a time to spiritually, mentally, and communally regroup.” I find some encouragement there, because lately at the end of each day I feel a strong need to “regroup.” But in these uncertain and troubling days, Butler Bass went on to offer this advice: “I urge church leaders to proceed with caution this year,” because “the conventional themes of Lent might be counter-productive.”

Now, many would probably agree that I’m generally one to proceed with caution.

At the same time, Congregational UCC is generally *unconventional*. So while this season is conventionally known as a time to give things up, our theme for Lent is DON’T GIVE UP FOR LENT.

DON’T GIVE UP FOR LENT—FIND STRENGTH. Together, let us “spiritually, mentally, and *communally* regroup” and search for strength in these days.

We need the strength that God provides for our lives, for these are days of, as the President said last week, “swift and unrelenting action.” Rapidly changing events press in on us, tempting us to let down, to quit—and that is the intent of the barrage of orders and actions coming out of Washington.

So, I encourage you: Don’t give up for Lent—Find Strength!

Our worship on Sunday mornings and the daily reflections you started to receiving last Wednesday will help us turn our hearts, minds, and spirits to the God who empowers us for the living of these days.

The strength of God comes to us in various ways at various times and in various places. This morning, I want to consider how we find that strength when in the wilderness.

All too often we find ourselves stumbling in the desert places of life and facing our own trials. As one person put it, “No Christian escapes a taste of the wilderness on the way to the Promised Land.” (Evelyn Underhill)

The wilderness, of course, can be found just about anywhere—at home, at work, in this city.

When you find yourself alone because of death, or divorce, or disregard, you’ve entered the wilderness.

When you’re out of work or your sense of self-worth is plummeting, you’ve entered the wilderness.

When the price of success seems to be turning your back on all your values, you’ve entered the wilderness.

When the world is in upheaval and established norms are collapsing before our eyes, we have entered the wilderness.

To be alive is to face wilderness times of trial.

A Connecticut businessman, Walter Levine, was diagnosed with multiple myeloma and given three days to live. With medical care, the support and love of his family and friends, and through prayer, he fought the cancer and won. Now, that, of course, is not the outcome that everyone has, even with love and prayer.

Reflecting on his experience, Levine says, “God is a forgiving merciful God, but life isn’t merciful. In life you’re put through tests.”

Commitment to God’s way doesn’t exempt us from times of trial. You know that. You know people who seek to live lives of faith who face chronic pain, family problems, unemployment. You’ve experienced these or other problems yourself.

When we are hit with difficult times it’s easy to ask “What’s wrong with me?” “What have I done wrong to deserve this?” These are old questions, as old as the friends of Job, who were certain that he had sinned terribly and in so doing had evoked the wrath of God upon him.

When facing difficult times, maybe we should ask instead: “What am I doing that is right?”

Jesus, “full of the Holy Spirit,” Jesus, “led by the Holy Spirit,” had a devilish time of testing in the wilderness. Certainly, this is a call to caution for all of us.

A commitment to a specific course of action, a decision for one way of life will put you in conflict with other possible actions. The person who has found peace with God comes into conflict with the violence of the world—and perhaps just as much, the person who has made peace with the world comes into conflict with God. The person whom God justifies comes into conflict with the injustice of the world and protests against it. The person whose soul is nourished by God sees the hunger rampant in the world.

Recall your own times of testing and trial. At the heart of each trial is the struggle to remain a faithful creature of the God who creates and sustains all things.

Faithful or not, however, each of us will experience times when our commitments are tested. To be alive is to face times of trial.

The testing of Jesus informs our own times of trial. Jesus was tempted, after all, not to do something harmful, but something that would benefit himself, something that would benefit others. Real temptation always seems to offer some good for us or for others.

Turning stones into bread would be good. It would feed Jesus, hungry in the wilderness; it would feed the hungry masses. In a world that is still hungry what could be better?

Jesus was tempted to seize power for himself. Most people know how familiar that temptation sounds—to get power over others, to control them for your own ends, "for their own good" we tell ourselves. Would it be so wrong if Jesus were to gain power and use it "for our good?"

Yes.

Finally comes the suggestion that Jesus throw himself off the temple and let God catch him. He could demonstrate to all the people that the laws of nature can be broken *for him*. Imagine those who would rush to follow after such a display.

Real temptation is an offer to rise, not to fall. We are not tempted by the ugly or by the base. We are tempted by all that is fine and beautiful and noble.

The tempter in the wilderness tests Jesus with “*If you are the son of God.*” Voices whisper to us about the wonderful things we could do if we would just set aside the fact that we are creatures and be more like the gods we think we are. We cannot honestly look at our own lives or look at today’s news without recognizing that temptation is still very real in the world.

Temptation plays to strength, not weakness. We are tempted to do what is in our power—the greater our strength, the greater the temptation. It always holds out some good. But it is the small print at the bottom of temptation that brings ruin.

Through times of trial we define who we are. The devil again: “*If you are the son of God.*” These tests will show just what kind of son Jesus is—one who goes his way or one who is faithful. Scripture provides way through these tests. Three times Jesus is tempted. Three times he replies: “*It is written . . .*” This is not an empty quoting of scripture as though certain words have some magical power.

Rather, Jesus shows his grounding in his community of faith, his history, an understanding of his destiny. It is the living Word of God that makes a difference, not words on paper.

So it was that the Hebrew people would recite their history as a people of God. A history of strength and also a history of trial as slaves in Egypt, of testing in the wilderness before coming to the land God would give them.

When God seems absent, there’s no telling what someone will turn to instead—which is why the opportunities for temptation are infinite. The trials of the desert led to an understanding of what it means to lose faith—a lesson still learned over and over today.

And yet, God was faithful. God fed the people. God gave them water. And when they turned to false gods, the living God remained true to the covenant made earlier: “*You shall be my people and I shall be your God.*”

We are renewed by God’s word as we are able to hear it today. We are grounded in our tradition. This is a place to work from, not to be stuck in. And so we are shaped by our faithful responses.

Temptation. Trial. Testing. We often think of them as negative. Instead, they are opportunities to grow up and find new strength. Temptation is a relatively neutral event—an experience that can be either positive or negative depending on how we react to it. After all, in many ways, it is not what happens to us that matters as much as how we choose to react to the event.

We are renewed by making choices because each choice defines who we are and who we will be. Through times of trial we give shape to people we are.

Call it what you will, we will continue to encounter evil in our lives. In us and among us and around us there is a strong opposition to love, health, wholeness, and peace.

Each encounter with this opposition will be a test, a trial.

Our coming through times of trial is never final. We learn from the story of Jesus in the wilderness that evil will wait for an opportune time. But this is not reason for despair.

For, if our victories are only provisional, the victory of Christ is final and certain. By faithfulness, even to the cross, Jesus Christ has overcome death. God has raised him so that we may know new life, and find renewal for our spirits in Christ.

This then, is the good news. We are never alone when we face times of trial. We are never alone when we face temptation, when we feel tested. In Jesus Christ, God knows the testing we encounter and has already walked where we walk. And this God is ready to offer forgiveness even when we give in, even when we choose—as we do—evil over good, the ways of death over the ways of life.

In the wilderness, we always have the opportunity to renew our weary and weak spirits and find the strength we need in these days.

Through testing, trials, and temptation we are alive to God—and God is made known to us.