



TRANSITIONS: TRUSTING GOD IN TIMES OF CHANGE WILDERNESS HOPE

Matthew 4:1-11

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Introduction

It wasn't very long in my own transition into pastoral ministry we I began to have second thoughts, when I began to wonder whether I might not have been better suited for the life of the academy. It wasn't very long into my own transition that I wanted to quit in order to do something else.

Thus, it was a fateful day when I was given David Hansen's little book on pastoral ministry entitled *The Art of Pastoring: Ministry Without All the Answers*. An amazingly honest book; here's what he says about pastoral ministry: "The pastoral ministry is a fast, and it lasts our whole life. We squirm under the pressure of it, and we become vulnerable to temptation because of it."

The pastor's fast forces us to learn that God provides us with all our daily bread so that we can be content in any and all circumstances and in no way have to take control of our own life and destiny. Of course this makes us feel as if we're going to die. We want to quit.

The temptation to quit comes early. We lust after a job in which we could turn stones into bread. Pastors really do have the ability to turn stones into bread. Anyone smart enough to pastor a church successfully could pursue almost any career for better money and fewer hassles."

The temptation is to lost hope and to quit in the midst of the wilderness. The temptation is to turn stones into bread. While the temptation for you is not to quit the ministry, there is I suspect the constant temptation to quit what it is that God has called you to. You're the mother of small children and you feel like giving up. Or you're the praying parent of a wayward adult child and you too feel like giving up. Or you've been a faithful employee in what feels like a dead-end job. Or you've been without work for months, and you've concluded there are no jobs. Or you're a student, struggling to find some purpose in it all and asking yourself why on earth God's got you doing what you're doing.

How do you find hope in the midst of the wilderness of this world? Where do you find hope in the midst of the wilderness of this world?

Today's message was originally going to be a message on Wilderness Warning and Hope. But by this point in our series on transitions, with sermons Wilderness Peril and Wilderness Apostasy and Wilderness Disillusionment and Wilderness Unbelief, I suspect the theme of warning has been underscored sufficiently enough. By now I think we all can understand why the Apostle Paul said of what happened to the Israelites in the wilderness: "Now these things happened to them as an example, but they were written down for our instruction" (1 Cor. 10:11), that is, as a warning to you and me.

So, instead, today I'd like to complete this series by focusing on hope. What is the source and the object of hope in the midst of your own times of wilderness transition? What is the source and object of our hope in the midst of the wilderness of this world?

We have one of the great, dramatic narratives of Scripture before us this morning: Jesus' confrontation with the Devil in the wilderness of testing and temptation. So we're going to take a look, not at the two million Israelites in the wilderness of Sinai, but the one, solitary Israelite, Jesus of Nazareth, and his perilous confrontation with the devil in the wilderness.

Like any good drama, the narrative of Matthew 4 is carried along by the exchange between the two main protagonists: Jesus and the devil, or the tempter. Before looking closely, we need first to observe how the stage has been set. Three things to note:

Setting the Stage for Wilderness Temptation

Baptism (3:13-17)

First, from the context, it's important to note that this period of wilderness testing and temptation takes place during a time of transition in Jesus' own life: Jesus' transition into public ministry, marked by his coming forward to receive the baptism of John in the river Jordan. His baptism marks his transition into public ministry.

His baptism also identifies his mission: "to fulfill all righteousness" (v. 15). In addition, it identifies his relationship with the Father, vv. 16-17—Jesus of Nazareth, Son of God, beloved of the Father.

Leading of the Spirit (4:1)

In the more immediate context, we see, secondly, the leading of the Spirit into the wilderness. "Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil" (v. 1). Several weeks ago we talked about God's sometimes counterintuitive leading during times of wilderness transition. Want to talk about being counterintuitive? This couldn't be more counterintuitive! The immediately preceding verse is happy, solemn affirmation of Sonship, with whom I am well pleased!

Next on the itinerary for the Son of God: is it a tour of the capital, Jerusalem, and state dinner with Jewish dignitaries and leading Roman officials? No! Rather, it's a lonely solitary walk about into the barren wilderness, led by the Spirit of God to be tested by God. But what is more—to be tempted by the devil! Having just been affirmed as son of God at his baptism, Jesus is now led into the wilderness of testing to be confirmed as Son of God.

Fasting and hunger (4:2)

Third, we don't want to miss another significant detail by way of setting the stage. Found in v. 2, surely one of the greatest understatements in all of Scripture: "And after fasting forty days and forty nights, he was hungry." You ever missed a meal? How about two? How about three? Doesn't feel so good? To make up for the lack of calories, the body begins the process of self-calorification—feeding upon itself. And the mind, as a result, can feel a bit woozy.

Try forty days and forty nights! You'd be hungry, as Jesus was. But notice something more: Jesus, God's son, is not play-acting in the wilderness. Jesus really was hungry because Jesus

really was—and is—a man. He is fully divine. But he is also fully human. That is orthodox Christian faith. So the hunger is real. He's not just feigning hunger for the sake of his readers.

Also, notice that the forty days and forty nights without food in the midst of the wilderness is an intentional allusion to Israel's forty years of wilderness wanderings. The only difference is that while the Lord let Israel hunger during their wilderness, Jesus' hunger was self-induced. It was the result of his own decision to fast.

So we see Jesus, the son of God, go through the waters and into the wilderness, to there hunger and thirst and be tempted and tested. We see Jesus, then, reenacting Israel's wilderness transition and testing in order to fulfill all righteousness. Where Israel failed in the wilderness of testing, Jesus succeeds, fulfilling all righteousness.

Wilderness Triumph in Four Scenes

Scene 1 – the temptation of pleasure (vv. 3-4)

Now the stage is set. The characters cast. The drama is ready to unfold. Scene One begins in verse 3, with the curtain being drawn and there, center stage, sits a hungry Jesus, in singular isolation. Then, from stage left, enters "the tempter." How does he appear? What does he look like? A dark apparition? A serpent? An angel of light? An imperceptible voice inside Jesus' head? We simply don't know.

What we do know is what the tempter said to hungry Jesus. [Read v. 3]. Ah, the intensity of the temptation! Men steal for bread to satisfy their hunger, you know. That's how acute the pain can be. All over world today people fight for loaves of bread to feed themselves. Here is Jesus, forty days and nights without food, an invitation to satiate his hunger with the simple command to the stones: Become bread! God supernaturally supplied Israel with manna to eat in the wilderness. Why does not the Son of God supernaturally supply for himself manna to eat in the wilderness? If you are the Son of God, then provide for yourself. Eat!

But Jesus answered, remembering the lesson of the wilderness, the lesson Israel found so hard to grasp: "It is written: 'Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.'"

It must be God's provision in God's timing and God's way.

Scene 2 – the temptation of power (vv. 5-7)

Rebuffed in his first attempt to tempt the son of God, Satan decides a change of scenery might be in order. So, as the text says, he takes up Jesus and goes to the holy city, Jerusalem, and sets him, like a miniature figurine, atop the pinnacle of the Temple, with a throng of people below.

A different scene, but it's the same tack. Perched up on the pinnacle of the temple, the devil again says to Jesus: "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down." It's an interesting experience to look out on top of a tall building, especially one that gives you outside access. You can hear and feel the wind gusting around you. You can look over the edge, down many feet below. Ever wonder what it would be like to just put a foot on edge and jump?

What is more, this time Satan reinforces the temptation by—of all things—quoting Scripture! "Throw yourself down, for it is written, says the devil. . ."

Did you know you can't outwit the devil? You can't out quote the devil. You can't out smart the devil. The devil has more Bible in his little pinky than this whole congregation combined. He's got the whole thing memorized: in Greek, Hebrew and even the bits in Aramaic that seminaries students don't know. You cannot defeat the devil with your knowledge of the Word. You can only defeat the devil with your *childlike reliance upon the Word*.

So we see Jesus, in humble trust, say to Satan the adversary. "Again it is written, You shall not put the Lord your God to the test." It's as if to say: I'm not going to exploit the rights of sonship, Satan, to satisfy your curiosity or my own. God's children don't intentionally put themselves in situations that demand God's response. If God wants to lead me off the edge of the pinnacle, as he has out into the wilderness, that's one thing. But I don't test the Lord to prove his goodness. He is good. I trust that.

Scene 3 – the temptation of pride (vv. 8-10)

Now, with two temptations and tests behind him, the tension mounts sky high—literally. For the third and final crack at the Son of God, the devil lifts him up to "a very high mountain top." From the wilderness to the pinnacle of the temple to the top of an Everest for the final and climactic temptation!

And as those of you know who have been to the tops of high mountain peaks, the views are stunning. You can see everything below at your feet, giving you intoxicating feelings of being, quite literally, on top of the world.

There's Jesus, on top of the world. And Satan, standing by his side, points out to the Son of God "all the kingdoms of the world"—and not just that: "all the kingdoms and their glory." Here is the final temptation: *the temptation of pride*—the unlawful acquisition of glory for oneself.

One writer describes the scene: "Once more forces collect for the assault—the mountain-peak view of the vast glory of the world, offering itself to him who is truly competent to rule! How the sensation of spiritual strength must swell the breast at Satan's words! The will to have power increased with the sense of exalted dignity and importance! Never was the costliness of earth more deeply felt than by Jesus' greatest and most sensitive of hearts! Sweet and potent, it must have hummed in his blood, calling up all his powers of creativeness and ownership. The greatness you feel in you, the mighty one that you are, what are you going to do with it? Squander it on the paltriness of the poor or the stuffiness of the pious, or, on the mission of being a wandering preacher? You were born to rule; the power and responsibility of a true sovereign await you! Tremendous temptation!"

Tremendous temptation! Tremendous, simple price! "All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me" (v. 9). A simple offer, a simple price—and a simple decision now confronts the son of God.

I imagine a short pause that seemed like an eternity because eternity hung in the balance. A short pause, and a deafening silence. All the hosts of heaven peering down with eyes trained upon the son of God to see what was to happen next.

There, atop the mountain, standing shoulder to shoulder with the Prince of the Air, the God of this Age is Jesus, who turns to Satan and utters one single forceful word: *Upage!* "Be gone!" Better: "Scram!" Luther's "one little word shall fell him!" Scram, Satan! For it is written: "You shall worship the Lord your God and him *only* shall you serve." There are ways to pursue the kingdoms of the world and their glory, but not your way, Satan. The kingdoms and all their

glory are mine, but not now. The cross must come before the crown; I must suffer before I enter into my glory.

Scene 4 – the resolution: Jesus triumphant (v. 11)

And before the angels of heaven could rise to their feet and let out a thunderous round of applause for the triumph of the son, the curtain closes on the scene. To open just a few seconds later for the final scene, scene four, verse 11: “Then the devil left him, and behold, angels came and were ministering to him.”

The lighting is now different. Not gray, ominous, overcast, but a lighter spring morning. We no longer hear the gust and howl of winds on high mountain peak. But soft, subtle music and there to find Jesus, I imagine, in all his Godlike serenity, now seated, still hungry. Though now not only in body, but in spirit utterly exhausted having to fend off the onslaught of the evil one. Over his shoulder, off far in the distance, we see the devil fade off into the horizon and finally out of sight. Not gone forever, but for now.

And just as devil fades out of sight, so enters a whole new cast of characters: the angels, who have come to minister to God’s exhausted soldier-son, to minister to him, to serve him.

Psalm 78:19 tells us that the Israelites, in midst of wilderness testing, tested God in their hearts and asked: “Can God spread a table in the wilderness?” Can God provide for us in time of want? Can he rain down manna from heaven?

The Psalm goes on to say: “[God] commanded the skies above and opened the doors of heaven, and he rained down on them manna to eat and gave them the grain of heaven. [Then, v. 25, it says] Man ate of the bread of the angels; he sent them food in abundance.”

Then the devil left him and, behold, angels came and ministered to him, bringing hungry Jesus manna from heaven, food in abundance, the bread of the angels. Jesus has passed the wilderness test. He has fulfilled all righteousness.

Conclusion

I said the fourth scene was the final scene. But that’s not quite right. There is a fifth scene to this drama. It’s a scene upon which the curtain has not yet fallen; it’s a scene that’s still in motion, even till today. It’s your scene, your life.

Imagine with me, then, this fifth and final scene: with you in the midst of the wilderness of this world. And there you are on the stage. How are *you* doing in the wilderness of this world, the wilderness of transition?

So for us today, who find ourselves in a time of wilderness transition and testing, where the temptation to quit is ever present, we need to look to Jesus. As the writer to the Hebrews encourages us: “*Consider Jesus, the apostle and high priest of our confession, who was faithful to him who appointed him.*”

Consider Jesus, when you feel discouraged by your changing circumstances. “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever” (Heb. 13:8). While everything else around you may be like shifting sand, you can nevertheless say of Jesus Christ: “He only is my rock and my salvation, my fortress; I shall not be shaken. On God rests my salvation and my glory; my mighty rock, my refuge is God” (Ps. 62:6-7).

Consider Jesus, when you feel defeated in your fight against sin, “the sin which clings so closely” (Heb. 12:1). “Since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need” (Heb. 4:14-16).

Consider Jesus, when you feel demoralized by your difficulties. “[Look] to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured from sinners such hostility against himself, so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted” (Heb. 12:2-3).

Consider Jesus, the apostle and high priest of our confession, who was faithful to him who appointed him. Consider Jesus, who is the only source and substance of real and lasting hope in the midst of the wilderness of this world.

Consider Jesus.

Amen.