

March 6, Lent 1C (Luke 4:1-13)

## **The wilderness can be a frightening landscape that whispers from the shadows, “You’re all alone.”**

by [Jennifer Moland-Kovash](#) in the [February 23, 2022](#) issue

We get some biblical whiplash this Sunday. Last Sunday we observed Jesus on the mountaintop—a wonderful, Broadway-style production with costume changes, offstage voices, and guest stars brought in from previous productions of God’s glory. Now we flash back to the beginning of Jesus’ public ministry, encountering him immediately after his baptism, still dripping wet, and headed into the wilderness.

The temptation in the wilderness is deeply familiar in lectionary-based contexts; it’s assigned each year at this time. The details vary a bit between Matthew and Luke, and Mark is predictably sparse, but the theme is consistent each year.

There’s comfort in familiarity, isn’t there? We know when we start reading it how it will end. We know that Jesus overcomes the temptations that the devil sets before him. It’s great to start Lent with a win, especially because I can almost guarantee I’ve already given up on whatever Lenten discipline I’ve set for myself.

I have a particular landscape that I picture when I hear the word *wilderness*. I grew up about 100 miles from the Canadian border in an area of northern Minnesota dubbed the Edge of the Wilderness. It is known far more for lakes and trees than for high population density. Maybe you associate a similar landscape with the idea of wilderness, or perhaps you envision the Badlands of the Dakotas, the Sand Flats of Utah, or the deserts of Arabia or Africa. Whatever the landscape, the wilderness rarely features a lot of other people.

But even in this early moment for Jesus, he’s remembering—in some of the same ways he does with Moses and Elijah on the mountaintop. He quotes Deuteronomy to respond to the tempter’s offers; he stands on the faith of his ancestors and finds their words to be rock solid in the face of temptation. Jesus might not have anyone

with him in the wilderness, but he is not alone.

One of the biggest temptations we face during times of struggle and wilderness wandering is the temptation to believe that we're all alone. Part of it is the myth of self-sufficiency, a myth often upheld and perpetuated by our society. We, like the toddlers in our lives, want to proclaim with a foot stomp and a fist clenched, "I do it myself!" Even now, I'll let out an excited proclamation that "I did it!" when a challenging baking endeavor works out. But I'm remiss if I don't acknowledge the hours I stood in someone else's kitchen, learning. We are always relying on the experience of those who have gone before us, those who still walk beside us.

The other side of this temptation is a heartbreaking sense that in this big world we are all alone. In Hebrew, one of the words for wilderness is more literally translated as "the wordless place." While maybe at times in our lives we might clamor for some peace and quiet, this wordless wilderness has a frightening landscape that whispers from the shadows, "You're all alone."

Our scriptures tell us that Jesus is hungry. This isn't a bored, "I'm hungry but there's nothing in the cupboards that looks good" hunger. After 40 days, this is a belly-rumbling, body clamoring for sustenance, haze-inducing kind of hunger. It's no wonder that the devil first pulls from the backpack of temptation the offer of a loaf of bread. But I wonder if Jesus is also hungering for something: for connection. For justice. For God's voice that called him the beloved at his baptism to ring out again across the landscape and from the mountaintop. To know that he isn't alone.

Wilderness time can feel really long, whether it's 40 days or 40 years or 40 minutes. Most of the time when we encounter the wilderness of the outdoors, we do so intentionally with adequate supplies, a plan, and an emergency contact if we don't emerge after a given time. But when we are in the woods of anxiety or the deserts of despair, the temptation is to believe that we are alone. We're approaching two years since we learned new, heightened meanings for words like *quarantine*, *pandemic*, and *pivot*. I know I'm not the only one desperately wanting to keep those around me safe, but there have been moments during these years when I think we have all felt alone and isolated with our thoughts.

Maybe the true comfort of this passage isn't that Jesus can successfully stand firm against temptation while I help myself to the chocolate I swore I was giving up, but rather that we're not alone in the wilderness. Not only do we have a community of

faith, we have the promises of God. We, like Jesus, do not head into the wild without feeling the waters of baptism still dripping down our foreheads. Without hearing that we're God's beloved.

We do not embark on this journey to live and trust and have faith without the assurance that the Spirit leads us: we do not go alone. We remember and acknowledge the wilderness of our journey—a wild place of questions and fears and doubts and temptations. This wilderness is part of our story but not the end. We have the voice that speaks in the wilderness, Christ shouting down the tempter and assuring us we are not alone. We have the promises that respond to our wilderness wanderings—the assurance of God's grace, the gift of worship and living bread from Christ, the communion of saints and the forgiveness of sins, the celebration of all the good things God has given us.