

Barre Congregational Church

February 21, 2021: A Pastoral Message by Pastor Margaret Keyser

~ **First Sunday of Lent**~

“The Spirit sent Him out into the desert!”

Our services can be found on our website at www.barrechurch.com and Facebook page.

Scripture Reading: Mark 1 verses 9-15

I. Introduction:

The Webster dictionary describes the term wilderness as “a region uncultivated and uninhabited by human beings”; and also, an “area essentially undisturbed by human ...” For most of us it would be a huge challenge to spend more than a few days in a wilderness area, because we have grown accustomed to the comforts of our homes, and perhaps the only time we would enjoy being in areas of simplicity and isolation with little or no amenities, is when we go camping in the woods, or escaping into the mountains during our vacations. Life in the wilderness or desert would therefore be an unfamiliar experience for many of us. The pandemic certainly has thrown us into our own spaces of isolation, where we for months now, have not enjoyed the company of our loved ones outside of our own homes freely.

Our text refers to a wilderness and desert area where Jesus would have been sent to be isolated for forty days and nights. Let us explore that further.

II. Background in the Gospels

Mark’s account of the Temptation of Jesus in the wilderness is quite different from that of Matthew and Luke. The latter two gospels describe how Jesus was tempted by Satan to turn stone into bread, to jump from the pinnacle of the temple, brought to a high mountain where He was shown all the Kingdoms of the world, which Satan would give to Him if He were to bow down to him and worship him. These temptations refer to the practices of the wonder workers during the time of Jesus, such as Simon Magus, who had the ability to turn stones into bread, and could fly. In Mark we only read a summary of Jesus being sent into the desert for 40 days and being tempted by Satan. These are quite different descriptions, but with one purpose in mind, to describe what Jesus went through during His time of isolation and prayer. We read how He

refused those requests from Satan, by saying, “Away from me, Satan, for it is written: Worship the Lord your God and serve Him only.” According to J.J Porter in his book, “The Illustrated Guide to the Bible” the Messiah “will not use His powers for self-preservation or world dominion. His work can only be accomplished through the Passion, death and Resurrection”. He was committed to His call and purpose, even though it brought Him much suffering.

One important point to make, is the fact that Jesus’s temptation was preceded by His baptism by John the Baptist, where He was filled with the Spirit of God, so He would withstand the forces of evil, and would be protected by and tended by God’s angels, while those temptations were going on. It is about the struggle between the forces of good and evil.

III. He was sent into the wilderness for forty days and forty nights.

Jesus was in the desert, or wilderness for forty days and forty nights, where He fasted and spent time with God. He was filled with the Spirit of God to withstand the dangers of wilderness life, as well as the temptations by Satan. In Mark we read that He was with the wild animals, or wild beasts, meaning it was not just barren, but rough and dangerous.

The wilderness of Judea where Jesus was driven to, lies between the Dead Sea and the Hebron Mountains, west of the Jordan River, where John the Baptist was living and preaching, according to Matthew 3v 5-6, and where he was performing His baptisms. The Judean Wilderness is known for its rugged landscape of mountain cliffs and hills, which provided a refuge and hiding place for those seeking solitude and isolation.

Jesus’ forty days and nights remind us of the sojourn that Moses took on Mount Sinai when he received the tablets of the Law. The story of the Israelites and their travels through the desert after going through the Red Sea, talks about their suffering from hunger, because there was no food, from thirst, because there was no water. The wilderness was also known as “the wilderness of the wanderings”. Their time in the wilderness was a time of testing according to Deuteronomy 8 v 2. Jesus’ responses to Satan were all spoken by Moses in Deuteronomy. His wilderness experience therefore is consistent with the wilderness experiences of Moses and Elijah, even though the Judean wilderness we read, does have rivers flowing through it, and

therefore Jesus could have drunk some water. It is not clear according to the Gospels, whether He did during His fasting.

Jesus was in isolation to be connected to God in prayer, and to strengthen His soul for what is to come. Jesus' presence in the wilderness reveals the work of God in and through Him, and His struggle against the forces of darkness, where His obedience to God is tested in the face of adversity. He was hungry and could have used His powers to turn those stones into bread, but He did not, because He did not need bread to have life. His Sonship would be proven by withstanding the temptations and staying strong in God and proclaiming God on High as the only God He would worship and rely on. He was sent into the wilderness in preparation for His life and ministry, the gathering of His disciples, His teachings, and the miracles He performed, and revealing to the world His identity as the Son of God. All this would prepare Him for His suffering and death on the cross later on.

IV. Conclusion:

Lent is therefore a time of spiritual isolation, where the church in the world creates spaces to listen to the voice of God. During this period of forty days, and nights, we too have the opportunity to find our own wilderness spaces, spaces of isolation, not the kind that the pandemic has put us in, but the spaces we create for ourselves where we spend time with God, in a disciplined way, allowing the Spirit of God to fill us, nourish us, strengthen us for our own journeys. It is for many a time to give up something, or change a behavior perhaps, but it is important to understand that it is a time of spiritual discipline, a humbling experience where we are spiritually isolated, spending time with God, studying God's word, listening to God's voice, and withstanding the forces of darkness around us. It is a time to develop our faith and trust in God, so we can carry on with hope for the future.

May this period of Lent be a blessing for all of us. Amen.