Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil.  

2 He fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished.  

3 The tempter came and said to him, “If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread.”  

4 But he answered, “It is written, ‘One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.’”  

5 Then the devil took him to the holy city and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple,  

6 saying to him, “If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down; for it is written, ‘He will command his angels concerning you,’ and ‘On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.’”  

7 Jesus said to him, “Again it is written, ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’”  

8 Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor;  

9 and he said to him, “All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me.”  

10 Jesus said to him, “Away with you, Satan! for it is written, ‘Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.’”  

11 Then the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him.

We’ll begin with a top ten list this morning. These are the top ten things that people are giving up for Lent this year:

10. junk food  
9. fast food  
8. sweets  
7. soda  
6. social networking  
5. swearing  
4. alcohol  
3. school  
2. twitter  
1. chocolate

Most of us are at least aware of this practice of giving something up for Lent. It’s interesting, though. The Barna Research Group conducted a survey this year and shared that just about 17% of Americans actually fast from something during Lent. So maybe just 1 in 6 people, which may not be all that surprising, because the question that looms out there around the practice of giving something up for Lent goes something like, So how does me giving up M&M’s for 6 and a half weeks—how, exactly, does that bring me closer to God? Right? How does a month and a half with no McDonalds or Kentucky Fried Chicken—how does that improve my spiritual life?

Of course, for lots of people, giving up something for Lent is about as spiritual as making a New Year’s resolution—it’s simply another avenue for self-improvement. We would all do well to go 40 days and nights with no ice cream, no soda, no trashy reality television. We’d all do well to go 40 days without cursing, 40 days without leaving wet towels on the floor, 40 days without yelling at anyone. These could be compelling fasts for some of us—maybe all of us.
The question is, “Why?” Why now? Why Lent? Why not all the time? Well, it all goes back to Jesus—that’s the Church’s answer. Jesus fasted for 40 days and nights in the wilderness, so we too ought to observe a fast in our own lives. Jesus gave up food so that he could pray and prepare himself for ministry, so we too ought to give up Facebook, donuts, or playing solitaire on our smart phones so that we can… pray?

If you ask me, it’s no surprise at all that just 1 in 6 Americans actually gives something up for Lent. The things we consider doing without are, in most cases, bad for us anyway, so we tend to view Lent as a somewhat arbitrary timeframe. And then, if we even flirt with the idea of giving them up for Lent, we’re not altogether clear on how that brings us closer to God. It does seem a little shallow for us to say that going without dessert in a house full of food somehow puts us in touch with Jesus going without food in the wilderness.

So, if you didn’t give up anything for Lent this year, you can feel ok about that decision, I suppose. Though let’s not all let ourselves off the hook so quickly. I’d still like to suggest that you observe a Lenten fast—that you think of something you might go without until Easter. And I know, I know—Lent has already started. We’re 4 days in already. But how’s this sound—we’ll give ourselves amnesty this year, and we can all begin today.

So I want to issue a Lenten invitation that for the next 40 days and nights, you consider a fast. But before we go there, I want to talk with you about the wilderness.

It’s worth remembering the story—that Jesus didn’t announce to his family and friends, “Hey guys, for the next 40 days, if you could just make a little less food, that’d be great—I’m not going to be eating.” Rather, he was in the wilderness—away from human contact, exposed to the elements, unsafe, wild animals, no shelter… Throughout the Bible, the wilderness is a place of testing and trial, of finding out what you’re worth, of connecting with (or failing to connect with) God and God’s purposes.

Writer Barbara Brown Taylor’s got a great description of what “the wilderness” might look like in our own lives. “Maybe it just looked like a hospital waiting room to you,” she writes, “or the sheets on a cheap motel bed after you got kicked out of your house, or maybe it looked like the parking lot where you couldn't find your car on the day you lost your job. It may even have been a kind of desert in the middle of your own chest, where you begged for a word from God and heard nothing but the wheezing bellows of your own breath.” [1]

We’ve all found ourselves out there. In the wilderness of money problems, of too much debt, of bills piling up and no end in sight.

The wilderness of a lump, then an exam, then a test, then a biopsy, then a meeting with the oncologist and a diagnosis and a treatment plan and one drug after another and side effects and the waiting for results and the wishing for another life.

The wilderness of depression.
The blinding wilderness of anger.
Before you think about what you’re going to fast from this Lenten season, I want you to think about the wilderness you’re facing in your own life.

The wilderness of a crumbling relationship.
The wilderness of indecision.
The wilderness of doubt.
The wilderness of change.

Could be you’re in the wilderness of busy. The wilderness of making time for everything and therefore having time for nothing.

As I was writing this sermon, I realized that perhaps some of this wilderness terrain is best explored in private, one-on-one conversations, and I would encourage you to go there—with me or with someone else. For now, though, here in this room, even in this moment, I want to pause, and I want to give you just a little bit of silence. And in this silence, I want you to ask yourself, “What is the wilderness I am facing in my life?” And just think about it. Don’t try to problem solve. Try not to let your mind wander into solutions for how you’re going to escape the wilderness. Just ask yourself, “What wilderness am I facing right now in my life?”

Please take a moment and do that right now…

Before I go on I want to point out that part of the wonder and power of having a church family like this is that here we have a community where we can be found, even when we’re lost in the wilderness.

Here’s the next question I want you to ask yourself. As you face the wilderness of your life right now, whatever it is, ask yourself, “What do I need to get rid of here?”

What do you need to drop?
What do you need to stop doing?
What do you need to get rid of?

This is the part of the sermon where you get to pick your Lenten fast. What is that thing that you keep doing? That you keep allowing to happen? What is that predictable pattern that you create in your life that you need to do without?

Maybe it is chocolate. But maybe it’s a little more complicated than that.

Cultivating faith in your wilderness might mean giving up the need to be right.
Or giving up always second-guessing yourself.
Or giving up judging that other person.
Or giving up always having to have the last word.
What will your fast be this Lenten Season?

Could you fast from bitterness?
Fast from fear of illness?
Fast on suspicion or gossip?
Fast from worrying about problems beyond your control?

Bitterness, fear, suspicion, worry—sometimes we consume these things like food—they become our daily sustaining diet, and strangely we rely on them to cope with the conditions we face in the wilderness.

Could you fast from one of those things this Lenten Season?
Could you fast from anxious thoughts?
Could you fast from expecting the worst?

Some years ago, Ed Bradley interviewed a family on 60 Minutes. This family lived in the wilderness of having a child confined to a wheelchair by spina bifida. Her mother was a religiously devout Christian. Her father, a painfully shy man who rarely spoke. Each year of their child’s life, the family made a pilgrimage to Lourdes in France, a place renowned for the physical healing that has occurred there.

Bradley was giving the family a bit of hard time; clearly, he found them gullible and impressionable. At one point he turned to the girl and asked her, “When you pray, what do you pray for?”

Without hesitation, she answered, “I pray that my father won’t be so shy. It makes him terribly lonely.”

That stopped Bradley for a moment, but he quickly recovered and forged ahead, questioning the family’s priorities and their wisdom, suggesting that it was a bit ridiculous to pay thousands of dollars each year to go to Lourdes when they still had no miracle to show for it.

But the mother, looking at her beloved daughter, simply answered, “Oh, Mr. Bradley, don’t you get it? We already have our miracle.” [2]

That’s faith in the wilderness—fasting from worry and fear, and feasting on the miracle of life and God’s goodness.

What will your fast be this Lenten Season?

Amen.

http://day1.org/1756-the_wilderness_exam/comments

2. For this sermon illustration I am grateful for the Rev. Amy Starr Redwine and the way she used it in her sermon, “God Revealed,” preached on January 17, 2010 at Firestone Park Presbyterian Church in Akron, OH.