

BREAD ALONE

LUKE 4:1-13

LETHBRIDGE MENNONITE CHURCH

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On this first Sunday of Lent, we journey with Jesus to a difficult place, to a lonely and barren place. A place where the ground is hard and unyielding.

To the wilderness.

I want to keep my words relatively brief this morning, as we get ready to move toward communion as the centre of our worship today.

But I want to look a bit more closely at one aspect of this well-known narrative of the temptation of Christ.

We are familiar with this story.

No sooner has Jesus come up out of the waters of baptism and heard the words, “You are my son in whom I am well pleased!” than he is led out into the wilderness by the Holy Spirit.

There, for forty days, he eats nothing and is tempted by the devil. At the end of these forty days, the devil offers Jesus three famous temptations.

1. Turn these stones into bread!
2. Bow down and worship me and I will give you authority over all the earth!
3. Throw yourself down from the temple and demonstrate that you are the Son of God.

Jesus resists all three temptations and returns, filled with the power of the Spirit, to Galilee to begin his public ministry of teaching, healing, and proclaiming the kingdom of God.

There are many things we could talk about in this story.

We could talk about the many parallels that exist between this story and the story of Israel.

We could talk about the forty years the nation of Israel spends in the wilderness being enacted by the forty days Jesus spent there (and the forty days of Lent). We could talk about how in both the case of Israel and Jesus, the wilderness was a place of preparation for what God was calling them to do.

We could go further back in the story and talk about connections to Genesis, with Jesus resisting the tempter where the first humans did not. We could talk about Jesus as the new Adam, undoing the damage done by the first Adam's fateful choice.

We could talk about how in this story Jesus is revealed as both the new Adam and the new Israel who exhibits perfect obedience and steadfast commitment to the will of God where the first Adam and the first Israel failed.

Those themes probably deserve a sermon on their own. But this morning, as we get ready to come to the table, I want to look at the question of *what* exactly Jesus was saying "no" to in the wilderness. And why.

It's worth noticing that each of the devil's temptations, if accepted, provide Jesus an opportunity to do something *good* in the world.

Feed the hungry. How a world full of poverty and inequality needs this! How the world has always needed this!

Rule with justice. Think of it—all the kingdoms of the world, given to Jesus! Who better to rule?

A divine spectacle. Something to remove doubt once and for all! A miracle to end all miracles, to silence the skeptics, and to wow people with a display of God-sized greatness!

And yet Jesus said no to each one. There are many reasons for this, the most significant having to do with a deep understanding of his identity and purpose in the world.

But I wonder if in rejecting these temptations Jesus was also saying something about *us*, about our reasons for bending the knee, about the things that sway our allegiance.

Perhaps in each “no” Jesus was also rejecting the idea of human worship, obedience, allegiance, that was *purchased* rather than *freely offered* in love.

This is perhaps nowhere more powerfully presented than in the Russian novelist Fyodor Dostoevsky’s famous work, *The Brothers Karamazov*.

One of the most well known chapters of this book is called “The Grand Inquisitor.” In it, Ivan Karamazov asks his younger brother, Alyosha, to imagine that Jesus has reappeared in medieval Spain at the height of the dark period of Christian history known as the Spanish Inquisition. The people recognize him, they rush toward him to embrace him.

But the Grand Inquisitor—the symbol of religious power and control—arrests Jesus, and begins a lengthy interrogation.

He takes Jesus back to the temptations in the wilderness, back to his rejection of each of the devil’s three offers:

Look, you see those stones in that naked, burning hot wilderness? Turn them into loaves and mankind will go trotting after you like a flock, grateful and obedient, though ever fearful that you may take away your hand and that your loaves may cease to come their way.’ But you did not want to deprive man of freedom and rejected the offer, **for what kind of freedom is it, you reasoned, if obedience is purchased with loaves?**

[Y]ou hoped that, in following you, man too would make do with God, not requiring a miracle. But you did not know that no sooner did man reject the miracle than he would reject God also, for man does not seek God so much as miracles.

Dostoevsky thought that at their very core, the temptations offered to Jesus in the wilderness were an offer to buy human allegiance, whether through bread, through political power, or through spectacle.

He thought that human beings have little interest in God, only the miracles God can provide.

As it happens, human beings are still very interested in bread, in power, and in spectacle.

And so, the season of Lent is a good one to ask ourselves difficult questions:

1. Do I want God or the things God can offer? Is God little more than a handy card to have in my pocket to get the things we want in life?
2. Do I worship God for who God is or because I want to back a winner?
3. Do I hunger for God's will or for a religious spectacle?

The wilderness is where we come face to face with our motivations for why we worship this God in the first place.

The wilderness is where, with fear and trembling, we ask ourselves: "Is God enough? Do I want *God* or the things God gives?"

Do I worship God freely, or is my obedience purchased with loaves?

We don't need to find a literal desert to ask these questions. Real life provides us with many opportunities.

Each one of us encounters desolate stretches of life where God can do business with us, where God can stretch and sift us, break us, refine us.

Maybe it's a battle with depression.

Maybe it's too many unanswered prayers.

Maybe it's a prolonged fight with disease.

Maybe it's a strained relationship. Maybe it's a child who has wandered far from home.

Maybe it's just a long desolate stretch where we feel like we are drifting aimlessly through life, without much direction or purpose.

Maybe it's an existential crisis. *Who am I? What am I doing here? Does any of what I have given my life to really matter?*

Maybe it's a crisis of faith. *Is God real? Is there a point to prayer? Are all those nagging doubts true?*

Whatever our wilderness might look like, I am convinced that it is often in the harsh places, the lonely places, the places where we feel abandoned and lost, that some of the most important lessons are learned.

The wilderness is where our worship and devotion can be purified, where our motives can be untangled, where we can learn to love God even when there are no loves.

The wilderness is where God weans us from our illusions of self-sufficiency and control—where we think that the story we are a part of is ours alone to tell. The wilderness lays bare our unspoken motivations, and teaches us what it means to rely completely on God.

Not on our ideas *about* God. Not on what we hope we might get *from* God. Not on the ways that God reinforces our ideas about ourselves.

Just God himself.

I am convinced that the wilderness is where we can attain clarity and conviction and renewed trust in God alone as the source and strength of our lives.

The wilderness is not an attractive or desirable place. It's not somewhere we want to be. The lessons it teaches are hard to learn and sometimes seem to demand too much of us.

But we need the wilderness.

We need the wilderness to discover that we do not live on bread alone but on the God who holds our beginnings, middles, and endings.

Amen.

