

**40 Days and 40 Nights**, a sermon in response to Mark 1:9-15, 1 Peter 3:18-22, and Genesis 9:8-17, by Rev. Scot McCachren for Hilltop Church, Mendham, NJ, February 18, 2024.

Since a time and place too remote from our recorded history for us to know *precisely* when... or how... or *why* it began, many Native American cultures have practiced a rite of passage now referred to as a Vision Quest, or a Personal Spiritual Journey. When a person is ready to be recognized as an adult and to embrace the full person they are becoming, – the contributions they will make, – their personal values and priorities... – when they are ready for it, the Great Spirit drives them out... far away from their community, – beyond their comfort zone, – to a solitary place in the wilderness. – ... There they enter a different kind of reality. They commune with the natural world – where the spirits can minister to them through wild beasts, and trees... through the wind, and the sun. +++ And there in the wilderness, over a period of days... you fast... You look into your soul... You wrestle with the Big Questions: Who am I? Why am I here? +++ It is a time when you are transformed into the person you are meant to be. +++ You are equipped and prepared for what lies ahead. – +++ ... +++ Then, eventually, you open your eyes, and you realize it is over. +++ However many days you’ve been away, +++ you are now ready to return to your people... to your family... You’ve been purified... You are at peace with your past and you are ready for your future... +++ ready to take your place among the other women and men of your people.

+++++

This morning, I’d like to take my cue from that intensely personal spiritual journey of the Native American Vision Quest, – a period of detachment that connects a person with God’s will and prepares for what lies ahead. –>> To do that, we’ll think about three things together: **1)** How it connects with what’s happening in *today’s* scripture readings; **2)** How it points to a consistent theme throughout much of the Bible; And, **3)** how it can help us get our hands around where we stand today, at the front edge of the Lenten Season – preparing ourselves to receive the blessing of our resurrected Lord at Easter.

+++++

So, let’s start by thinking about what’s happening in our scripture readings... +++ First of all, we need to do a little prep work... Just like it’s sometimes hard for us on Christmas Eve to remember that the Shepherds and Wise Men do not appear together at Jesus’ nativity, – that they are in completely different gospel narratives, the Wise Men actually come later, so they could *never* have been with Jesus at the same time as the shepherds; ... like that, it’s also not easy for us to think about Mark’s depiction of Jesus’ temptation in the wilderness without overlaying what we know about the more familiar versions in Matthew and Luke, – even though Mark was the first gospel written. +++ Here, the entire temptation narrative is only two verses long: “<sup>12</sup>And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. <sup>13</sup>He was in the wilderness for forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him.” +++ What’s the obvious thing that’s missing? Jesus does not have a personal confrontation with Satan in Mark. There’s no travel from the wilderness to a mountaintop or the temple – no suggestion to overcome hunger by turning stones into bread – no offering of power or wealth for Jesus to refuse – no dramatic conclusion of victory, with Jesus saying, “*Away with you, Satan!*” +++ Without those elements, there are no easy moral lessons here for us to apply to overcoming our own “temptations” for power..., or wealth..., or respect. +++ In fact, there’s no real moral dilemma for Jesus at all in Mark. – We aren’t even sure how it turns out... We just know Jesus was “tempted by Satan – he was with the wild beasts – and the angels waited on him.” +++ It seems to me that something much more primal is happening here. +++ So, let’s erase all our preconceptions from our minds for a moment – and walk through just exactly what IS happening in Mark’s depiction of Jesus’ Temptation in the Wilderness. +++ The great Spirit of God descends on Jesus in his baptism and immediately drives him into the wilderness. Now, in Matthew and Luke, the Spirit leads Jesus into the wilderness – but in Mark, it DRIVES him, using the same Greek verb, *ekballo*, as when Jesus drives demons out of people... This is not a comfortable verb – the Spirit is driving Jesus out of his comfort zone, into the Wilderness, ... and doing it very suddenly... and “with almost *violent* power.” ... And, let’s don’t forget, they were already in the wilderness. As Eugene Boring describes it, it’s like Jesus is driven to “a *double* wilderness. John is already baptizing in the Wilderness, but it is a known wilderness, a wilderness of this world, it’s familiar, populated by people... [But now], the Spirit drives him *away* from other people into” an other-worldly setting where Satan and Angels await him – and where wild animals will interact with him. +++ And now, ... as in our Vision Quest, ... this young man who is about to embark upon his lifework, is left here in the wilderness – for 40 Days and 40 Nights – to wrestle with the Big Questions.

But let's delve still a bit deeper into what makes Mark unique – (and I hope you'll bear with me as I investigate a couple more of the Greek words with you). +++ All of our translations tell us that Satan TEMPTED Jesus there in the Wilderness, and that's certainly what happens in Matthew and Luke as Jesus does battle with Satan... But in Mark, I think something different is happening... This word translated as "Tempted" is *peirazō*, and it *can* mean "to tempt", but also "to *examin*", or "to *test*." +++ (Now – hold onto that while we look at what the angels are doing.) +++ Our New Revised Standard Version reading tells us the angels "**waited on**" Jesus through these 40 Days and Nights. But I like the King James Version better here: It says the "Angels ministered unto him." The Greek word is *diakoneo*, which is the source of our word Deacon – it does mean "to serve" but most often in a spiritual capacity – **as in "to minister to someone."** +++ OK – so, now, let's put this all back together... what does all this mean, and why am I looking so carefully at these words? +++ During this formative time for Jesus – when he has been driven into this other-worldly wilderness to become the teacher and minister he was meant to be – I THINK the conflict taking place is not simply moral temptations for Jesus. I think the conflict, in Mark, is between the power of God, expressed through the work of the Spirit and those ministering angels – and the power of God's adversary, Satan – testing Jesus, arguing, and desperately trying everything to undermine the angels' ministry and sidetrack the Holy Spirit that had just filled Jesus at his baptism...; +++ both sides making their case to Jesus...; in a cosmic power struggle that he endures for 40 Days and 40 Nights. +++ +++ **And then it is over.** +++ Satan is gone... the Angels are gone... As with a concluding Vision Quest, Jesus is now ready to return to his people... He is at peace with who he is. – And he is ready to take on the future. +++ +++ +++ And only then, upon his return from the wilderness, and without hesitation, Jesus begins his public work, proclaiming what we've already discovered to be his first words in the Gospel: "*The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.*" – Then he proceeds to call his first disciples. +++ +++ +++ >>> As it turns out, I think those 40 Days and 40 Nights are a **gift** to Jesus. They give him a chance to step back from the usual rhythms of his life at this critical moment... - He takes the time to meditate about *his own* journey... - and to wrestle and make peace with any remaining doubts that Satan threw into his mind. – Afterwards, Jesus is ready to return, refreshed and ready for the hard work – and the painful sacrifices – that lay ahead.

+++++ +++++

I think it's worth noting how important times of introspection, self-discovery, and transition in the Bible **often** take place over a period of time marked by the number 40. – Today's Old Testament narrative about Noah is another example. The rains fall for 40 Days and 40 Nights as the old world passes away and a new world was born. It is a time of reflection and of change. And when the floods have, God makes a covenant with Noah that never again would a flood be sent to destroy the earth – and the rainbow is a sign of the covenant forever. +++ **40 Days of darkness led to humanity's reconciliation with God.**

+++++ +++++

**Moses** is alone with God on Mt. Sinai for 40 Days and 40 Nights with neither bread nor water. During that time, God renews the covenant with Israel, speaking directly to Moses, and creating the tablets for 10 Commandments. After this 40-Day encounter with God, Moses comes back down the mountain with his face shining so brightly that the people are afraid of him. Moses had to cover his face with a cloth just to speak to them.... +++ **40 Days in God's overwhelming presence gave Israel the law.** +++ +++ All of **Israel** remains in the wilderness for 40 Years before God allows them to enter Canaan. That was a period of deep introspection for God's People. As the end of this time finally approached, Moses explained it, saying, "Remember the long way that the Lord your God has *led* you these forty years in the wilderness, in order to humble you, testing you to know what was in your heart, whether or not you would keep his commandments..." +++ **40 Years in the Wilderness made Israel worthy and ready to receive the gift of the Promised Land.** +++ The great prophet **Elijah** was in **despair**, fleeing for his life from Jezebel, the wife of the King. He finally sits beneath a tree and prays to just be allowed to die. Instead, he has an experience similar to the temptation of Christ... An Angel visits him, encouraging Elijah to eat a meal before going high onto the Mountain of God, alone, with no food or water for 40 Days and Nights, to rediscover where to find God in his life. And where does he finally find the Lord? Not in a mighty wind that split mountains and broke rocks apart; not in an earthquake that shook the mountain at its core; and not in a great fire that threatened to consume everything. Instead of these overwhelmingly powerful places, Elijah finally finds God in the "sound of sheer silence" that followed, or as it appears in the King James Version, after fasting for 40 Days, Elijah finds God

in “a still... small... voice.” +++ **40 Days of fasting alone on God’s Mountain gave Elijah the perspective to find his God again – and the strength to face his problems and continue his work as a prophet.** +++ +++ +++ And finally, I’ll mention the great city of Nineveh, where God sent Jonah to warn its people, “Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!” But instead of arguing, or begging, or fleeing, the people and their King took God’s warning to heart. They repented of their sins, and over those next remaining 40 Days and 40 Nights, everyone in the city fasted (even doing without water). They wore sackcloth and turned from their evil ways. When God saw how they had earnestly turned away from evil, the Lord had mercy and they were saved from destruction. **40 Days of honestly confessing sin and turning back to God saved the city of Nineveh.** +++ +++

+++++

**And, my friends, here we stand** – today – at the beginning of the Lenten Season – when we are each given the gift of **our** very own **40 Days and 40 Nights** – and invited to do nothing more..., *and nothing less...*, than look inside **ourselves** – **and prepare to receive the blessing of our resurrected Lord at Easter.** +++ Today, God’s Great Spirit would drive *you* from **your** comfortable places..., alone..., into the **wilderness** ... – where you can wrestle with *your own* Big Questions: *Who* am I?... *Why* am **I** here? +++ *Where* do I find God in **my** life? – *Am I* tuned into that “still small voice” of silence? +++ Am I **stuck** in daily routines – in a life of comfort – or can I **empty** myself to receive the saving grace of my Risen Lord? – **And how can I use this time to prepare?** +++ These **40 Days and 40 Nights** of Lent are YOUR chance to step back from your busy day-to-day realities, – to focus on your journey... - It’s a time to make peace with any remaining doubts that are in your mind. – To be deeply refreshed – and made ready for what lies ahead. +++ +++ **It’s in the wilderness that the angels wait to minister to you through these 40 Days. – Go meet them there and receive their counsel.** +++

+++++

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.