

Mother Lynn Finnegan  
Church of the Holy Faith  
First Sunday in Lent  
Deuteronomy 26:1-11; Ps 91: 1-2, 9-16;  
Romans 10:8b-13; Luke 4:1-13  
March 9, 2025

### Cable Cars and Cafes

Last week, we celebrated the Feast of the Transfiguration, where we met the dazzling white Jesus, along with Peter, James, John, Moses, and Elijah, high on a mountain. Today, instead of “springing forward,” we are rewinding the biblical clock to the very beginning of Jesus’ ministry. The First Sunday in Lent will always begin with the scene of Jesus in the wilderness. While none of the gospels pinpoint the location of the “wilderness,” Christian tradition holds that Jesus climbed into a cave on Mt Quarantal, a high place in the wilderness west of the Jordan River, and less than a day’s journey from Jericho. The cave would have been an ideal location for solitude, prayer, and fasting. Based on this tradition, in the year 340, the mount was renamed The Mount of Temptation and became the site of a monastic community whose monks lived in a cluster of caves. Today, the Mount of Temptation has a full-fledged Greek Orthodox monastery, appropriately named the Monastery of the Temptation. The monastery is built into the cliffside 1100 feet above sea level. Billed as a tourist attraction that commands (quote) “a magnificent and panoramic view of the Jordan Valley,” it can be reached via cable car (an addition the monks didn’t approve) that (quote) “brings visitors in comfort to the site.” There’s even a café at the top. All of which seems a little too ironic to me.

Don’t get me wrong: I totally understand the economics of tourism in the Holy Land. Maybe you’ve been there and found it inspiring. I can’t help but be dismayed, though, that the wilderness location of Jesus’ time of penitence, fasting, prayer, and vulnerability – second in vulnerability only to the cross – now sports a comfortable cable car and a café.

“Wilderness” in Greek denotes an empty space, a deserted place, a wasteland. A place of extreme vulnerability, the motif of wilderness in the Bible should be familiar to us. Historically, the wilderness was where God covenanted with the Hebrew people after their liberation from slavery in Egypt. In the empty space of the wilderness, God led his people with cloud by day and fire by night. In the deserted place of the wilderness, God provided manna to eat and food to drink. And in the vulnerable place of the wilderness, God’s people succumbed to temptation and disobedience, rejected God’s plan for them, doubted his mercy, and feared his abandonment. With their complaints and their conflicts, they wandered for forty years before reaching the Promised Land – a journey that should have taken about eleven days.

And now, Jesus, led by the Holy Spirit into the wilderness in preparation for the rigors of his ministry, finds himself being tested in the same manner as God’s ancient people, except Jesus has entered the wilderness voluntarily. Jesus has stripped himself of all comforts, all distractions, all tangible security. In what sounds like an obvious statement, Luke notes that Jesus, after eating nothing at all for forty days, “was famished.” This, however, is not a tongue-in-cheek comment, but an affirmation of Jesus’ humanity. Jesus IS hungry. He IS weak. He IS vulnerable to the testing and the deceit of the devil, and he IS tempted to doubt God’s faithfulness and plan for his ministry. I mean, honestly, the devil’s ideas are simpler: they are more efficient and practical. Why not serve yourself, Jesus, rule with power, defy your physical nature, and forego pain and suffering for immediate glory? Why not? Because that is not God’s plan for Jesus and Jesus affirms his divinely appointed identity by rejecting it. In the Incarnation, God humbled himself, emptied himself, and set Jesus on the path of living and teaching that might doesn’t make right, the first shall be last, turn the other cheek, love your enemies, and serve instead of being served. This is the way of the cross and the way of true salvation, true healing, and true love. The same

Spirit that descended on Jesus in baptism and led him *into* the wilderness, now empowers Jesus to remain trustful and faithful *in* the wilderness. We often speak of Jesus setting his face toward Jerusalem and the way of the cross after he descended the Mount of Transfiguration, but in reality, it is here, in the wilderness, that Jesus' footsteps are firmly planted on his path of sacrificial love.

The wilderness is a deserted, empty place, but it is also a place of preparation. The Spirit led Jesus into the wilderness as a preparation, through fasting, prayer, and solitude, for his ministry ahead. Even though the devil's testing must have been physically stressful and spiritually challenging, the emptiness of the wilderness provided the focus Jesus needed.

We are in the season of Lent, a time sometimes referred to as an opportunity for a wilderness experience. And I do mean opportunity. Although we are more like the Hebrews in the wilderness than we are like Jesus when it comes to withstanding temptation, 1) wilderness provides the open, silent space for seeking direction and purpose; and 2) The Holy Spirit accompanies us every moment of the way. Lent is a time to enter the wilderness eagerly, albeit with a healthy dose of trepidation. It is a time for taking forty days to step back, narrow our focus, and shed the unnecessary noise of whatever metaphorical cable cars and cafes stand between us and honest conversation with God. It is a time "to sit [really sit] with what is fragile. To let grace sneak in through the cracks."<sup>1</sup> Fourteenth century priest, mystic, and theologian Meister Eckhart observed, "God is not found in the soul by adding anything, but by a process of subtraction." What needs to be subtracted from your life as you enter the wilderness of Lent? What personas or images are you clinging to, what fears, judgments or beliefs prevent you from

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<sup>1</sup> Kate Bowler, "Lent is here: the season of admitting we don't have it all together. (And maybe we never did.)" Email dated March 5, 2025, from [hello@katebowler.com](mailto:hello@katebowler.com)

stepping forward, what habits, distractions, or routines stand between you and a vulnerable walk out into a deserted place? Your bulletin lists several Lenten options here at Holy Faith intended to assist you in your walk. Don't participate in all of them, however, as the heaping on of spiritual practices can be a tempting wilderness avoidance strategy. Prayerfully consider what might be best for YOU, prayerfully consider how this Lent can be a time set apart. Prayerfully ask God, who sees you, knows you, and loves you, to provide you your own cliffside cave space. I will be praying for you too. Amen.