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*Wilderness Temptations*  
Luke 4:1-13

The settings of deserts and wilderness are well-used backdrops to test, define, and refine a person's character. The 1997 movie, *The Edge*, written by David Mamet and starring Anthony Hopkins and Alec Baldwin pits a billionaire magazine publisher against the wilds of the Alaskan wilderness and a conniving, ambitious employee against him after their plane crashes in the wild. The rest of the movie is about survival in the wilderness in which character, integrity, and motive for life dominate.

Brian Tracey, a successful business guru and motivational speaker, tells of crossing the Sahara Desert in crude fashion. One of his goals as a young twenty-something was to do so. Learning how to survive challenge after challenge taught him much about himself and life.

Jesus' "forty-day" retreat in the wilderness has momentous echoes from Israel's past. Is this Jesus in the desert for forty days or Moses in the wilderness for forty years?

"Moses dragged us for 40 years through the desert to bring us to the one place in the Middle East where there was no oil," Gold Meir, the fourth Prime Minister of Israel, once quipped. Jewish comedian, Elayne Bossler commented: "My ancestors wandered lost in the wilderness for forty years because even in biblical times, men would not stop to ask for directions!"

The temptations Luke describes in these thirteen verses, Matthew addresses as well, but in a different order. Mark sums up the wilderness experience in two verses by saying that Jesus was driven by the Spirit into the wilderness for forty days, tempted by Satan, was with wild beasts, and angels ministered to him.

Jesus' wilderness experience—his retreat into the desert— was a time to "step outside himself" to discern who he was, what he was to do with his life, and what obstacles he faced.

The Exodus of the Hebrews from Egyptian slavery and their wandering in the wilderness for years is the most powerful story of Jewish history. The story is told repeatedly in the psalms in addition to the book of Exodus. It was a time for their loosely structured “nation” to rediscover “who they were,” “what they were to do,” and “what obstacles they needed to overcome.”

The Hebrews’ journey witnessed a remarkable initial release from the Pharaoh. Pharaoh changed his mind about giving the Hebrews their freedom and pursued them to the shallow, muddy, reedy swamp of the Red Sea where they escaped.

Taking only what could be carried on their backs and a few animals, they ventured further into the desert wilderness. Limited food and water created tension and anxiety, causing them to turn on each other and Moses. Some began longing for the slavery and inhumanity from which they had escaped. They experienced feeding off the desert manna and they learned how to appreciate the blessing of “enough.” The Hebrew people learned how to live with one another in civility, which is what the development of the “Ten Commandments” was all about.

Moses led them to the edge of their Promise Land, charged them with taking the land promised by Yahweh, only to have their lack of unity forfeit the promised claim. The consequence of their disunity was to continue to wander. A few misguided Hebrews decided on their own to cross the Jordan and go into the land, this time against Moses warning, and they died. They experience more years of wandering until at last they crossed the Jordan, changing from wanderers to settlers, shepherds to agriculturalists, and nomads to citizens.

St. John of the Cross used the metaphor “the dark night of the soul” to describe a phase in a person’s spiritual life marked by a sense of loneliness and desolation. Sometimes in the desert, stability and slavery looks better than independence and responsibility. Stay in the desert too long and you begin to think sand and intense heat is the best there is. Tie a racehorse to a wagon for too long and he begins to think like a mule.

Any of this sound familiar? When I came to Hilton three and a half years ago, I thought the struggle Hilton had gone through was behind her. Most of you thought the struggle seven-plus years back was behind you, too. Several of you

told me so. Nine months in to my ministry at Hilton, I realized it wasn't so. Unresolved conflict has a way of holding people hostage with anger, fear, despair, or the need to control. It's easier to get angry with people than it is to apologize, or acknowledge your sadness, or be willing to start all over in a relationship.

During my two years of clinical internship at the Pastoral Care Department of Georgia Baptist Medical Center, I watched numerous Columbia and Emory seminary students along with several dislocated pastors come and go for a semester. While the purpose of Clinical Pastoral Education (CPE) was to develop and sharpen pastoral skills, the real arena was that of getting to know yourself much better to enable better pastoral care to take place. It was more like being placed in a microwave oven with all of your emotions exploding. Those tight emotional relationships during each of the semesters made the departures difficult. I began to notice a common pattern at "departure time." Those whose time was up and were departing would often find something to get angry about, rather than talking about their sadness in this desert time coming to an end. That's the "fight or flight" principle Freud spoke of for those who think there are only two ways of dealing with conflict.

We can always find a way to be angry with each other, rather than tell each other how badly we are hurting, how sad losing friendships have been, how sad losing a beloved minister has been, and how sad seeing part of the culture of Hilton Presbyterian Church destroyed.

I've witnessed many of you in tears, I've seen some of you display inappropriate anger and uncivil behavior, and I've shed my own tears over you. It's time to turn it loose or it will eventually eat us alive.

I understand that some of the unresolved feelings have nothing to do with the tensions from seven years back. We all bring our issues with us, and when we begin projecting feelings from the past into present situations, things can get real distorted.

The problems were bigger than your last head-of-staff and associate who were of different theological persuasion, just as the ongoing pain is bigger than any misunderstanding. Our newer members don't understand any of these things and really have no reason to understand them. They are free from it. I

haven't had a dog in this fight, but I've seen the way it has taken energy and life out of some of you.

Years ago in my first church, I had a most unhappy and dysfunctional female member. She had a way of gathering unhappy people around her under the guise of a Sunday School class party, or a party at her home. Visiting with her in her home one afternoon during that first year, I got a glimpse of the deeper issues. Her home had been that of her mother's, and her mother had lived with her family until she died. "Mama" had died some years before I arrived, but her room was completely in tact—clothes in the closet and all. "Mama" had dominated this woman's life for years and was still doing so, even after her death. Her unresolved anger and grief corrupted almost everything it came in contact with. It finally resulted in Louise taking her own life.

Whether you want to be in a desert or not, the circumstances offer you the opportunity to learn more about who you are, what you are doing with your life, what obstacles you need to overcome, and what personal issues you need to deal with. As I said in the Ash Wednesday service, Lent is a season of reflection, a time to step outside ourselves, a time to change our minds and our attitudes, a time to ask forgiveness and make right what is wrong. Or else, we all just keep going through the motions and deceiving ourselves. In forty years, we could still be wandering in the desert, or we can decide we want to quit wandering, become citizens in a new land, and begin realizing our inheritance again.

For those of you who want to keep wandering, you can do so. But, for those of you who do not, it's time to name the elephant in the room and act as responsible citizens of a healthy community and kindly call a halt to it.

Some of you have had heartache locked inside you for seven-plus years. Some of you have been living in the past, which locks you out of the future. It's time to lay your burdens down by the riverside and cross over. It's time to bury the dead so that you can get on with life. It's time to get serious about spiritual matters or else Lent and Easter don't have much real meaning for you. It's time...

### **Deuteronomy 26:1-11**

1When you have come into the land that the LORD your God is giving you as an inheritance to possess, and you possess it, and settle in it, 2you shall take some of the first of all the fruit of the ground, which you harvest from the land that the LORD your God is giving you, and you shall put it in a basket and go to the place that the LORD your God will choose as a dwelling for his name. 3You shall go to the priest who is in office at that time, and say to him, "Today I declare to the LORD your God that I have come into the land that the LORD swore to our ancestors to give us." 4When the priest takes the basket from your hand and sets it down before the altar of the LORD your God, 5you shall make this response before the LORD your God: "A wandering Aramean was my ancestor; he went down into Egypt and lived there as an alien, few in number, and there he became a great nation, mighty and populous. 6When the Egyptians treated us harshly and afflicted us, by imposing hard labor on us, 7we cried to the LORD, the God of our ancestors; the LORD heard our voice and saw our affliction, our toil, and our oppression. 8The LORD brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with a terrifying display of power, and with signs and wonders; 9and he brought us into this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey. 10So now I bring the first of the fruit of the ground that you, O LORD, have given me." You shall set it down before the LORD your God and bow down before the LORD your God. 11Then you, together with the Levites and the aliens who reside among you, shall celebrate with all the bounty that the LORD your God has given to you and to your house.

### **Luke 4:1-13**

1Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, 2where for forty days he was tempted by the devil. He ate nothing at all during those days, and when they were over, he was famished. 3The devil said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread." 4Jesus answered him, "It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone.'"

5Then the devil led him up and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. 6And the devil said to him, "To you I will give their glory and all this authority; for it has been given over to me, and I give it to anyone I please. 7If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours." 8Jesus answered him, "It is written, 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.'"

9Then the devil took him to Jerusalem, and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here, 10for it is written, 'He will command his angels concerning you, to protect you,' 11and 'On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.'" 12Jesus answered him, "It is said, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'" 13When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time.