

Following the Footsteps of Jesus; into the Negev (desert)

Shepherd's Grace Church

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Luke 4:1-13

4Jesus, 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. (Also read Deut. 26: 1-11, Romans 10: 8-15)

Today we begin our journey with Jesus in earnest! We follow Him to the desert, the wilderness, and not just any wilderness. I am attaching a picture at the end of this message you can scroll down to now and see the wilderness Jesus is led to. This place is called the Negev, the Hebrew word for desert. Some think Jesus was led to a place that was simply void of human contact, a wild place where there would have still been vegetation, but I am convinced He was led to here. Why? Because here is an absolute place of desolation. Here is also a place where the people of Israel would have been led after they crossed the Red Sea and were headed for their final destination; the promised land!

When I traveled to this place in 2006, I came from Ein Gedi on the shores of the Red Sea. I can imagine the people crossing the sea, being pursued by Pharaoh, being led by God's mighty hand. I can imagine them camping at a place similar to Ein Gedi, I can imagine Miriam singing her song of thanksgiving, I can imagine them finding a place of rest, thinking they were finally home, thinking they had arrived! Then I can imagine God leading them back out into the wilderness, going ahead of them as a cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night until they came to this place, the Negev, the desert!

Here in this place or one very close to it, God would have told them through Moses, you are about to cross over into a land that I have promised you, a land I promised your ancestors. I can imagine the Hebrew people looking around them, I can imagine them looking as far as the eye could see and I can

imagine them seeing nothing! From this place you can look in any direction and see only desolation, only isolation. From this place it would be difficult to hear, nearly impossible to believe the words God was sharing with them. You are about to enter into a land flowing with milk and honey. When you reap the rewards of the land, bring your first fruits to the altar and remember all God has done to bring you to this place of promise!

It is from a place such as this that the people would have revolted against God, complaining to Moses that Moses had led them to a place of utter desolation so they could die here in the wilderness. They would have said, "we were better off in Egypt where at least we knew we had food to eat and a place to sleep! Here, in this place the people would feel, do feel an absolute and complete isolation from God, perhaps even from life itself! They have witnessed His mighty deeds and have been privy to his unparalleled protection and yet, as they looked around they could not comprehend what He was saying. They could not imagine a future.

The promise God makes to the people of Israel in a place such as this is precisely why I believe we Follow the Footsteps of Jesus to this place this morning. God wants us in this moment to witness the promise we have in Jesus and He wants us to witness it from here, a place of utter desolation, a place of lifelessness, a place without possibilities! God wants us to hear the possible from an impossible place!

In Luke's gospel, the Holy Spirit leads Jesus (and us) into the wilderness. In Mark's account, Jesus is driven, suggesting He doesn't want to go, but in Luke Jesus is led. This suggests a willingness, an imminent understanding of what was necessary. Jesus, filled with the Holy Spirit has a new found faith in God. He has just been baptized. He has completely died to His old self and is now eager to begin his new mission. In Romans 6 Paul describes this activity. He says we go under the water destroying who and what we are to emerge to a new life, an eternal life! Earlier in chapter 2 of Romans, the Apostle claims we are saved by grace through faith. Jesus' baptism in chapter 3 of Luke's gospel affirms His faith. He dies to his temptation, turns all of that over to God and willingly steps forward into a possibility promised even before the beginning of time! In this moment He submits absolutely to God's will!

As we follow Jesus footsteps, it is important to understand that Jesus is fully human, filled with the same kind of doubt and temptation we are. Now, however, his life has been transformed! He has experienced the new life that comes from going under the water. He has experienced the same strong arm of God guiding him through death and into life that the Israelites experience at the Red Sea. Now, he is led, not forced or driven according to Luke to a place of seeming impossibility to ponder new possibilities. In this moment, Jesus is led to hell!

Scripture describes hell as a place of unquenchable fire. Jesus Himself uses this metaphor a number of times, but I believe that is all it is; a metaphor. I believe hell is, instead, a place of absolute desolation

where the absence of life is striking in its abundance! Hell is a place where there is no possible contact with God who is life and who gives life! In Luke 16 this is clearly illustrated as Lazarus (not the same one as is raised from the dead) and the rich man die and Lazarus, the beggar, goes to heaven and finds himself comforted in Abraham's bosom. The rich man however has refused God all his life and has chosen hell. There, Abraham describes a great chasm over which no one can cross! This uncrossable, unfathomable place is the desolation we know as hell!

God led the Israelites there to promise them all the abundance of life, but they were unable to see it. They rejected Moses, rejected God, and ran even deeper into the wilderness. As a result of their rejection, not only this time, but in the countless numbers of other times God offered God's grace they never crossed over into the promised land! They died in the wilderness never knowing the fullness of God's promise to them. That fullness was left to another generation.

Now comes Jesus! In the fullness of time comes Jesus! In the fullness of time, God sent His Son! In the same way the chosen people were led to hell to hear the word of God and believe it, so Jesus is also sent. I believe he is sent to hell now, not after crucifixion. After crucifixion his work was finished. He goes to hell now to demonstrate his obedience to God. I know it is hell for two reasons. First, because it is a place of utter desolation and devastation where he can see no possibility to satisfy his human needs. Second, because the devil shows up!

Whenever we face a time of trial, we can be sure that two will show up. God, who never leaves us or forsakes or abandons us will always be there. However in those most difficult times another will also be there. The devil will be there at those moments of our greatest doubt. He will tempt us just as he tempts Jesus, playing on our weakness, playing on our perceived worldly need. In that moment when the devil makes his pitch to us, he offers not something glorious and grandiose, but something simple, something that would seem to be in our best interest, but he always offers it with an action required by us, an action that turns our attention away from the things we truly need most.

In this case, the devil offers Jesus a stone, a simple stone that will affirm who he is. The devil says, "if you are the son of God, turn this stone into a loaf of bread." Jesus had eaten nothing for 40 days and was famished. The Hebrew people hearing the use of 40 days would have harkened back to the time Elijah spent 40 days wandering with nothing to eat, and also the 40 years that the chosen people spent wandering in the wilderness until that generation passed away and the next generation could cross over into the promise. Jesus however, sees the stone and is strengthened not by its illicit possibilities but rather by its inherent qualities.

Jesus would have remembered the Psalms and the words written there. "The stone the builders rejected has become the corner stone." In that moment, he would have remembered that stones were for building, for creating, for making stronger, and even in his hunger, he knew the importance of

keeping the world in order. In absolute obedience he quoted scripture to the devil saying “He humbled you by letting you hunger, then by feeding you with manna, with which neither you nor your ancestors were acquainted, in order to make you understand that one does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord.” (Deut. 8:3) In this reference, Jesus reminds us that we must always look for the truth behind what is offered to us.

Our hunger, our desire to satisfy ourselves keeps us from a total reliance on God. When we believe we can turn the stone into bread we fail our faith in two ways. First we destroy the true purposes for which our resources were intended. We break the stone and thereby fail to allow it to be used for its intended purpose. Second, we continue to believe that somehow we can solve our problems! As long as we think we are in control of our lives, we can never completely let God take control and use us for His purposes and to His glory! If we are to follow in the Footsteps of Jesus, we must find His path to obedience. We can only get there through our own self denial. This Lenten season is the ideal opportunity to test ourselves.

We must seize this opportunity quickly. The devil doesn't wait long to bring us again to the very gates of hell. Look what happens as we follow Jesus still further today. The devil takes him to a high mountain. The picture at the end offers a view from the highest point in Israel. From here as you look, you see the borders with Syria. Immediately ahead of you is Damascus. Behind you is Tel A Viv. To the west is New York City and to the East is Beijing. This temptation reminds us that even when things seem to be going well for us, we are still subject to temptation.

The devil shows Jesus in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. Jesus would have seen kingdoms past, present and future. These scenes would have been what the Israelites hoped for as they were led to the wilderness. They believed they were promised a land of milk and honey and that it should have been hand delivered. God asks them to imagine a future with Him and they not only could not, but they would not! God knows that when things are offered easily, they are often not appreciated. When things are offered easily, God often does not get the credit.

The lesson we learn from the mountain top steps of Jesus is that the things of this world are not important, the things of this world are worth nothing if we do not understand Who gives us these things. We understand this if we Follow the Footsteps of Jesus, if we step in faith! The author of *Hebrews* says it this way, “Faith is the essence of things hoped for, the promise of things not seen.” Jesus knows and wants to teach that what is seen is not the fullness, what is unseen is the greater promise! As a result, when the devil offers kingdom, power and authority in exchange for worship of him, Jesus replies again from scripture saying, “The Lord your God you shall fear; him you shall serve.” (Deut. 6: 13) The praise and honor belong to God as does the worship. The devil can offer worldly temptations, but worship and praise belong to God alone!

The devil, then realizing perhaps that a mistake has been made leads Jesus to Jerusalem and the pinnacle of the temple. Here, the devil quotes scripture to Jesus. He quotes Psalm 91 when he tells Jesus to throw himself down from here if indeed He is the “Son of God.” He says, “For he will command his angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways. On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.” (Psalm 91: 11-12) Perhaps he is thinking, worship of me is too much to ask, maybe I can convince Him to display God’s power for his own glory.

When we find God intervening in our lives, it is tempting to take credit for things that are going well for us. Sometimes we want to push at our good fortune. We get greedy or lustful because we have been blessed. God always offers His presence, sometimes we take the credit. I often wonder as I see a professional athlete celebrate after a big play by pointing to the sky or kneeling if the person is actually giving God the glory or if the person is calling attention to himself or herself. The reason I wonder is as I listen to the post game interviews and the comments the following week, I rarely hear the mention of God’s involvement in the person’s life. Sometimes I wonder about these same gestures in our lives. Do we give God the glory or do we use God to call attention to ourselves.

Today, Jesus recognizes that He can do what the devil asks, He can prove God’s power in a very flamboyant manner, but He also recognizes this act will call more attention to Him than to God. The act will serve no purpose, help no person and only sensationalize a situation that doesn’t deserve a second look. This kind of act happens in church frequently. We can call attention to ourselves by the work we do or by the actions we take, but the attention attracts no one to the Lord. The action only serves to glorify us, or our church. We need no glory! Sometimes we are so concerned about how we do church, we forget why we do church. We must always remember that “to God belongs the glory,” We must always respond as Jesus does. “Do not put the Lord your God to the test, as you tested him at Massah.” (Deut. 6: 16)

The Hebrew people, looking at the vast emptiness that showed them the promise of life without God could not accept possibilities beyond what they could see. They wanted proof. They complained bitterly and taunted Moses and God. They wanted food and water in this wasteland we know as hell. Their complaining got them an immediate result. They struck the rock at Massah and living water flowed. The stone they struck however destroyed their relationship with God. Just as Jesus realized that turning the stone to bread would destroy a relationship of trust with God, the people experienced this separation. They received the water but they lost their inheritance! They put God to the test and God proved equal; God provided but at what cost! Only two crossed over to the promised land. The rest perished!

God is not to be tested, God is to be trusted. He will be there when we need Him but we must learn to rely on only Him and call on Him first even before we call on our own abilities. When we do this the devil will leave us. The devil is defeated when we turn to God first, trusting only in Him for all our needs.

We see this today as the devil, having completed all of his tests of Jesus departs. He leaves Jesus back out on the wilderness, looking into the very presence of hell, but looking this time from the side of victory. Jesus has overcome and we are witnesses because we have followed in his footsteps.

As we came away from the picture you have been looking at this morning we traveled along in the midst of this desolation and desperation. There was no evidence of life for a long ways and then, far in the distance, we saw green trees and planted rows of crops. In the midst of this hell, this negev, this lifeless desert there was an oasis. Over thousands of years the Israeli people have learned how to bring water to this barren wasteland. They have learned how to take salt out of sea water in ways sufficient to allow that water to bring life where there was formerly only death! Jesus adds this water today. In John's gospel, Jesus tells the Samaritan woman, "Ask and I will give you living water so you will never thirst again." The oasis we see is not a mirage. It is real. Because we have followed Jesus Footsteps today, we begin to recognize new possibilities. There is life in the midst of death, there is water in the wilderness if we will only and always walk in faith!

As we stop at one such oasis, we find not only the vegetation we can see from a distance but we find human life. In the last picture we look at today we find the Bedouins, a group of nomadic people who live in the midst of the desolation we have seen this morning. We enter their village, a tent village and we meet a member of their community who is grinding coffee. Slowly others emerge from places we had not even noticed. We learn that the coffee grinder is like a town crier. The way he makes different sounds with the mortar and pistil notify the community of new events taking place. In the midst of death, we have found life. In the midst of trial and temptation, we have found hope, a promise that was beyond our seeing, but because we have followed in the footsteps of Jesus, we have discovered a new way to look at faith!

Mother Theresa expresses this discovery for us in a very beautiful reminder,

"People are often unreasonable, irrational, and self-centered. Forgive them anyway.
If you are kind, people may accuse you of selfish, ulterior motives. Be kind anyway.
If you are successful, you will win some unfaithful friends and some genuine enemies. Succeed anyway.
If you are honest and sincere people may deceive you. Be honest and sincere anyway.
What you spend years creating, others could destroy overnight. Create anyway.
If you find serenity and happiness, some may be jealous. Be happy anyway.
The good you do today, will often be forgotten. Do good anyway.
Give the best you have, and it will never be enough. Give your best anyway.
In the final analysis, it is between you and God. It was never between you and them anyway."

Following the footsteps of Jesus even to the very brink of hell means understanding that our relationship is about what we choose to make it. God is present with us each and every step of the way and if we are willing to be obedient to Him we will be blessed, not with material treasures but with heavenly treasures that cannot be destroyed or stolen (Matt. 6) We may not see these things now, but they are our promise.

Our faith rests on our willingness to accept. Romans 10 tells us if we believe with our heart and confess with our mouth then we will be saved. We may not be able to see what we believe with earthly eyes, but God asks us, demands of us that we look beyond the earthly and imagine the heavenly. There we will see the harvest, the first fruits. Jesus is that first fruit for us and for all. Our opportunity is to take that first fruit and present it to God at the altar and then share it with our friends, our neighbors and those whom we have not even met yet! "Happy are the feet of those who bring the good news!" May your feet be blessed and your life be filled with joy today and always as you "Follow the Footsteps of Jesus!" Amen!





Next Week: Scripture: Luke 13: 31-35. Message: *Following the Footsteps of Jesus to the synagogue.*
This week we will continue our journey as we join Jesus in worship. Imagine being in worship with Jesus. Would you act differently? Would you approach Him and talk? What would you want to know? Come and Worship! Come and See!

