

Sermon Lent 1 Year A 2026 (All Saints); Gospel: Matthew 4: 1-11

*In the name of God the Creator, the Christ Jesus, and the Holy Spirit. Amen*

### **The Gospel: A Guide for the Wilderness**

Being lost in the wilderness is a recurring theme in both the Jewish Bible and the New Testament. Matthew's gospel today depicts Jesus being led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by Satan. Or as Eugene Peterson puts it in his Bible translation The Message, "Next Jesus was taken into the **wild** by the Spirit for the Test." This is another of Matthew's typologies. Moses spent forty days in the wilderness on Mount Sinai listening to God give the law. Israel spent forty years with Moses in the wilderness trying to learn to trust God. The prophet Elijah spent forty days on that same mountain running from the wicked Jezebel before hearing the still, small voice of God—God in the silence. Not only Matthew but both Mark and Luke have their own stories about Jesus' forty days in the wilderness. For Jesus these forty days were a period of preparation between his baptism and his ministry—during which, while alone, exhausted, hungry and weak, he was tested by Satan. I'm sure it was hard. I'm sure it was awful. But apparently it was necessary. Those of us who believe the story have proof that it is humanly possible to remain loyal to God, in the midst of any temptation, including a culture which is constantly pulling us in the other direction. Perhaps we too need these forty days of wilderness time to cleanse our own systems and open our eyes to what remains when it seems that all comfort is gone, that everything is lost, that the world has "gone to hell in a hand basket."

It was at the Council of Nicaea in 325 CE that the church established a season called Lent, from the old Anglo-Saxon word *lencton*, meaning "spring"—not only a reference to the season before Easter, but also an invitation to new life for the soul. Forty days to remember what it is like to reunite with our source God, to re-discover that connection, that union, to return to God when we have wandered away. Indeed as we move through this season, the forty days will

grow longer and warmer and brighter. It is during the weeks of Lent that we, like all the life around us—the plants and trees and birds and all the animals—begin to emerge from the dormancy of our winter homes, to open our eyes to look at nature for signs of new life. So, even as we take this time during Lent to reflect upon our sins—I prefer to say our separation from God—we can also see it as a time of being refreshed by this God who provides new life over and over again, this God the source and ground of life. Many of you will remember Father Dick Schmidt. He said this: “The most important thing to remember during Lent is that you are loved.” It is that love, I believe—the love of God and of our community—that can guide our way through the wilderness we so often experience in our own lives, and yes that includes through the wilderness we are currently encountering in our country and in the world.

Of course this wilderness is not a new thing. It has always been there, and we are witnessing it today. Our challenge is to find a way through it, and as Jesus was able to do in his wilderness time of temptation, to confront the evil that is always present, and then to overcome it. Dietrich Bonhoeffer certainly experienced this wilderness, did what he could to navigate his way through it, and sadly paid the ultimate price for his outspoken resistance to it. He was a German theologian who had come to America to spend time at Union Theological Seminary in New York. In 1931, after a year there, he became convinced that he must return to his home Germany to counter the rising power of Hitler and the Nazis. From the first days of the Nazi rise to power in 1933, he was a strong activist involved in protests against the authoritarian regime, its anti-Semitism, its powerful nationalism, and its genocidal agenda. He became a leading spokesman for the Confessing Church, the center of German Protestant resistance to the Nazi regime, often at odds with the Catholic Church itself. He organized and headed a new seminary for the Confessing Church which, despite having been outlawed by the Nazis in 1937, continued in disguised form until 1940. Throughout his time in Germany he remained active in ecumenical affairs

despite the increasingly hateful nationalistic mood in the country. He helped smuggle Jews into Switzerland. He also criticized the church, saying that “the Church was silent when it should have cried out because the blood of the innocent was crying aloud to heaven. She is guilty of the deaths of the weakest and most defenseless brothers of Jesus Christ.” He continued to work for the resistance movement. His anti-Nazi involvement became increasingly political after 1938, when he was introduced to a group seeking to overthrow Hitler. He was ultimately arrested on April 5, 1943 and was imprisoned in Berlin. Following the failure of the attempt on Hitler’s life on July 20th of 1944, the discovery of documents linking him directly to that conspiracy led to his further interrogation and imprisonment. He was executed by hanging by the Gestapo on April 9, 1945 in the concentration camp in Flossenburg, Germany, at the age of 39, only days before Germany’s surrender to end World War II.

Bonhoeffer’s life is a witness to one man’s extraordinary faith as well as to the tortured fate of the nation he sought to deliver from the curse of Nazism. He fearlessly spoke truth and challenged the Nazis. He was a man determined to live out the gospel of Christ radically, courageously, at times even joyfully—even to the point of death. His is the story of a life with a passion for truth and a commitment to justice on behalf of people who face the evil of those in control of his country. A quote near the end of his life: “Silence in the face of evil is itself evil. God will not hold us guiltless. Not to speak is to speak. Not to act is to act.”

What a powerful witness to courage in the face of evil. What a model for truly living out the gospel, for as Jesus said, “No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.” (John 15:13) Bonhoeffer’s book The Cost of Discipleship speaks to what true discipleship entails. He writes about “cheap grace” and “costly grace:” “Cheap grace is the grace we bestow on ourselves...grace without discipleship...Costly grace is the gospel which must be sought again and again, the gift which must be asked for...It is costly because it costs a man his life, and it is grace because it gives a man the only

true life.” Talk about a challenging message! I have to admit that I am intimidated by Bonhoeffer and his life, intimidated because I’m not sure I could follow in his footsteps. Do I think that we must all be martyrs in order to be followers of Christ? Of course not! But I do believe that we must let go of—we must die to—those parts of ourselves that separate us from Christ, and from his gospel: die to selfishness, to pride, to fear of speaking the truth that threatens those in power, to the need for control, to the sense of superiority over others not like us. These are the things that separate us from God—these are our sins.

We have seen some of Bonhoeffer’s kind of courage, that kind of faith in and commitment to the gospel, in our church today. Bishop Mariann Edgar Budde, the Bishop of Washington D.C. over the Washington National Cathedral, is one. She has a long history of ministry, activism, and advocacy. You may have seen her challenge Donald Trump at the Cathedral last year, at the end of the presidential inauguration festivities. This may be old news now, but it is worth remembering. She originally intended in her sermon to mention three values important for national unity: honoring the inherent dignity of every human being, honesty, and humility. But after she heard Trump’s inaugural address the day before, and saw the executive orders he signed immediately after, she said “I found myself thinking, there’s a fourth thing we need for unity in this country—we need Mercy.” “We need mercy, we need compassion. We need empathy.” The sermon that she delivered, as Trump and his Vice President Vance sat quietly just a few feet away, pleaded with the president to have mercy on people who stand to be disproportionately impacted by his administration’s policies—namely, LGBTQ people and immigrant families. “In the name of God, I ask you to have mercy upon the people in our country who are scared now...there are gay, lesbian and transgender children in both Democratic, Republican and independent families who fear for their lives.” She also made a plea for immigrants, who Budde said, “are not criminals but people who pay taxes, and are good neighbors.”

The crisis we now face in our country, and also within the church, really has nothing to do with being liberal or conservative, progressive or traditional. It has everything to do with following and living out the gospel of Christ. Sadly, in its place in our country there has been widespread adoption of a common nationalistic identity that is part patriotism, part consumerism, part violence, and part affluence. What has resulted is a greedy un-neighborly economy, a politics of exclusion that fears the other, and a self-indulgent consumerism that devours creation. Walter Brueggemann in his Devotions for Lent says that during Lent, as we ponder where we are headed, perhaps it could be the neighborhood of, as he puts it, *shalom*, the neighborhood of shared resources, of inclusive politics, of random acts of hospitality and intentional acts of justice, of fearless neighborliness that is not propelled by greed or anxiety or excessive self-preoccupation. That, my friends, is gospel language.

So let's enter this Season of Lent—this wilderness time—with some introspection—some self-evaluation—into those parts of our lives that are holding us back from truly living out the gospel of Christ. The wilderness can be a quiet place where we can listen more carefully. Lent is an opportunity to confront our own temptations and illusions. The wilderness can show us what we cling to. It can uncover the quiet idols we didn't know we were serving. We may discover how much we rely on comfort, distraction, consumption, and control. We may also begin to notice a subtle connection to and guidance of God that our busyness can drown out. Perhaps we too, like Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Mariann Budde, and others, will find the courage to live out the gospel that Jesus proclaims.

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