

## Pacific Christ Trail

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Song: *You Make Beautiful Things* by Michael Gungor

Scripture reading: Matthew 4:1-11

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Today is the first Sunday of Lent. We begin a reenactment of an ancient story, namely the forty-year-old wilderness journey of Moses and the Hebrews from slavery in Egypt to freedom in the Promised Land. Jesus reenacted this same journey with his forty days in the wilderness after being baptized by John the Baptist in the Jordan River and receiving the blessing of the Holy Spirit, "You are my Beloved Son."

What the Hebrew people learned while in the wilderness is what they needed to know to begin a new life in the Promised Land. What Jesus learned in the wilderness is what he needed to know to begin his journey to Jerusalem. So let's let Jesus be our wilderness guide as we prepare to make our way to Easter, 2017.

Being baptized in the Jordan River and hearing the blessing of God, "You are my beloved Son;" going into the wilderness for forty days to live in complete dependence on what God offered through the land; being protected by angels. This was Jesus' experience. Simplifying all of his needs to the most basic and having these needs met in the wilderness gave Jesus a complete connection with the source of all creation, enabling him to pass the tests put to him by the demonic powers of the world and to resist the temptation to misuse power. To each temptation to misuse power and glory, Jesus said *no*. Because Jesus was centered in the Beloved, and because he knew his own image as a reflection of the Beloved, Jesus knew that the power of *love of* others gives life, while the power of *control over* others brings death. Creativity and freedom are the nature of God's gifts.

Jesus, baptized in love at the Jordan River and held in the loving arms of John the Baptist, and then experiencing complete surrender and protection in the wilderness, is ready to share with anyone who will listen the reality of receiving food, clothing, shelter, welcome, compassion, freedom. If you look at the scripture passage from Matthew, you will notice that it begins and ends with the Spirit. It begins with Jesus being led by the Spirit into the wilderness; it ends with the angels attending to Jesus, just as they had in the wilderness.

*Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. He fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished. The tempter came and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread." But he answered, "It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.'"*

*Then the devil took him to the holy city and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down; for it is written, 'He will command his angels concerning you,' and 'On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash*

*your foot against a stone.” Jesus said to him, “Again it is written, ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’” Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor; and he said to him, “All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me.” Jesus said to him, “Away with you, Satan! for it is written, ‘Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.’” Then the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him.*

I want to look a little more closely at this ancient story of freedom and trust. For this I am using another wilderness guide, Bishop John Shelby Spong and his book, *Biblical Literalism: A Gentile Heresy*.

Jesus is in the wilderness for forty days, a symbolic reenactment of the forty years in the wilderness of the Hebrew people. The tests that he faces in his interaction with the “tester,” “the devil,” are a reenactment of what Moses and the Hebrew people experienced in the desert. The Hebrews needed to learn a deeper connection with the Holy One before they could enter the Holy Land. Jesus likewise needed to pass the same test before he began his journey of teaching and healing that would eventually lead to Jerusalem.

Moses faced three trials during the forty years in the wilderness. Jesus faced three tests from the Devil: 1) *The shortage of food*. Moses prayed. Manna fell from heaven. Jesus was told to make bread out of stones out of his own power. 2) *Shortage of water* near a place called Meribah. The people felt God no longer cared and was no longer present, so they complained. Moses struck the rock and water flowed. Jesus was told to jump from a temple tower because the angels would come and save him. 3) *Shortage of God*. Moses was away from the people and they quickly felt abandoned and chose Aaron as their leader and made for themselves a God that they could see, a God made out of gold. Jesus was promised that he could rule the entire world if he would bow to the false God.

Jesus passed each test, just as Moses had. For what Jesus learned about trusting in the presence of God in the wilderness is what allowed him to know the true meaning of the Scriptures. As Wendell Berry says in his poem *Wild Geese*, “All we need is here.” And as Michael Gungor says in his beautiful song, “God is able to make beautiful things from dust, and from us. If only we could trust that.”

This is a story that the audience of the Gospel writer Matthew would be able to relate to. It’s strange how easily we can relate to the story today. Consider these questions:

*How do we prepare for this wilderness walk through the season of Lent?*

*How do we develop this level of trust and knowledge that leads to freedom?*

*How do we prepare for Easter?*

The answer to these questions is: *The same way we get to Carnegie Hall: we practice, practice, practice.*

One of the spiritual practices of Lent is to fast. I first learned about Lent and fasting from my sixth grade friend Griff Morrison, who was Catholic. I remember the shock and horror I felt when he couldn’t join me in one of our favorite activities, riding our bikes to the local donut shop. He had given up donuts for Lent!

I want to share two other stories of fasting for Lent. The first comes from Eugene Peterson, author of *The Message*, the version of the Bible that we read from this morning. Now eighty-three years old,

Eugene Peterson served as a pastor for twenty-nine years. Frustrated with the unimaginative way he found his congregants treating their Bibles, he translated the Bible himself, and that translation has sold millions of copies around the world. Eugene Peterson's down-to-earth faith hinges on a love of metaphor and a commitment to the Bible's poetry as what keeps it alive to the world.

In her on-line program, "On Being," Krista Tippett asked Eugene Petersen about his spiritual practices. Here is part of their exchange:

**Mr. Peterson:** *For years, the first thing in the morning, I have about an hour of just quiet and coffee. And I read seven Psalms that I believe kind of cover the waterfront of what's going on, what it means to be human. I read them, then I shut up. And I just breathe deeply, and for another fifteen, twenty, twenty-five minutes, just try to empty myself of everything. But there's enough going on through that first entry that it seeps into your imagination. And so you're not really just emptying yourself, you're emptying yourself of a certain amount of clutter so that the words you really need to know kind of fit in. I've been doing this so long now that I think I'm praying when I don't know I'm praying. It's entered into my subconscious, and so I feel like it is something that's been going on in me for years and years and years, which is pretty much absorbed into my psyche now. And it gives me hope*

*When I was a pastor of a congregation, people would leave and say, "How do I pick a church?" My usual answer was: go to the closest church to where you live, and the smallest. And if after six months it's just not working, go to the next smallest.*

**Ms. Tippett:** [laughs] *OK, so what is it about small rather than big?*

**Mr. Peterson:** *Because you have to deal with people as they are. And you've got to learn how to love them when they're not loveable. And we go to a church now that's — I'm a Presbyterian, but it's a Lutheran church. And most of the people are my age. And our pastor is young. And he's a really good pastor. But I don't go to church for the pastor — I mean, I go there to be immersed in what I don't know about. And these people. I mean, there's eighty people in church, and I don't — I know some of them quite well. I grew up with many of them. I would just — they still treat me like a little kid. And, so that's kind of refreshing.*

The second story about fasting comes from Pope Francis. "What are you giving up for Lent?" It's a question a lot of people will get these next few days. If you want to change your body, perhaps giving up alcohol and candy is the way to go. But if you want to change your heart, a harder fast is needed. Pope Francis has asked us to reconsider the heart of the practice of fasting during this Lenten season. He says

*No act of virtue can be great if it is not followed by advantage for others. So, no matter how much time you spend fasting, no matter how much you sleep on a hard floor and eat ashes and sigh continually, if you do no good to others, you do nothing great. ... Whenever our interior life becomes caught up in its own interests and concerns, there is no longer room for others, no place for the poor. God's voice is no longer heard, the quiet joy of God's love is no longer felt, and the desire to do good fades.*

So, if we're going to fast from anything this Lent, Francis suggests that even more than from candy or alcohol, we fast from indifference towards others. When we fast from this indifference, we can begin to feast on love. In fact, Lent is the perfect time to learn how to love again. Jesus—the great protagonist of this holy season—certainly showed us the way. In Jesus, no one is excluded.

As we travel this Camino of Lent let us listen deeply to the guides who keep us on the path that will open our hearts to a community where we can experience a love that can make us whole and set us free. As the days lengthen and the light increases, may our spiritual practice increase the light in our hearts and our relationships with one another, in these dark times. May we have the faith and the courage to face the darkness, hearing our guides tell us when to say *No* and when to say *Yes*. Let us say *Yes to Life!*