

Anywhere and Everywhere

Sermon 9 | Greystone Baptist Church | March 10, 2019

First Sunday Lent

Luke 4: 1-13

In seventh grade I had a crush on a boy named Dallas. I knew it the first time I saw him. He was tall, blonde, and on the basketball team. He was everything a middle school girl could want. As you might suppose, he was dating a cheerleader when I first discovered him. Together, they were unstoppable, a teenage powerhouse of beauty, style, and popularity.

For all the confidence that my crush conveyed during those middle school years, I struggled to find my place. I was quick to note that those who seemed to always fit in wore stylish clothes and always travelled in a pack. So, I began copying that behavior. I found a friend who was a transfer student from a neighboring school. She had somehow made it onto the cheerleading squad over the summer. I knew that would help me grow in popularity. Luckily for me, she turned out to be a really nice kid and we became best friends. We would shop together and pick out trendy clothes. This particular school year baggy jeans were in style. JNCO's was the most popular brand and so that's what we bought. They were skateboarding jeans made for every-day wear. Buying them was only half of it. Now that they were in our closets, we had to wear them. It was a fashion shift for me so summoning the courage to step out of my mom's minivan wearing them was going to be a challenge.

Knowing that my future with Dallas was on the line, I did what any seventh-grade girl would do... I called my friend, made her promise to two critical things. One: wear her JNCOs on the same day. Two: meet me in the carpool drop off area at exactly 7:32am so that we could walk in to the building together.

Looking back now, it is painfully clear that even though my strategies ultimately failed, I had already figured out what it would take to survive middle school... I needed to find a way to *belong*.

Social scientists Brené Brown and Christena Cleveland have each done incredible research on the power of belonging. Both agree that humans are social beings, we are made for community, we need one another to survive. And yet, throughout human history we have created categories so that we can understand the world around us. He is like me, she is not. I am safe here, I'm in danger there. We place ourselves in groups with those who are most similar to us, because those places feel safe, and leave others on the outside. And there have been times when that kind of sorting was essential.

Brené Brown's work builds upon this historic need to belong and she calls into question the ways in which we identify those who are in and those who are out. She argues that we have over-sorted ourselves and moved so far away from one another that we have

forgotten how to interact as people, across lines of difference. She calls this over-sorted, divided reality, *wilderness*. While she doesn't use Jesus' experience of wilderness in her book, the parallels are striking.

In today's reading from the Gospel of Luke, we find Jesus on the brink of his wilderness journey. Much like you and I might be experiencing temptation in the first days of our Lenten journeys, Jesus is quickly met with trials in his wilderness.

Jesus was fasting for the duration of his wilderness experience, and so the very first temptation is one of basic hunger.

"If you are the Son of God," the devil says to him, "command this stone to become a loaf of bread."

Jesus was fasting for the duration of his wilderness experience, and so the very first temptation is one of basic hunger. It's a slow ball tossed in Jesus' direction. You must be hungry, the devil says, by all means, eat! But Jesus does not give in, instead he responds with scripture, "One does not live by bread alone."

Seeing that Jesus would not give in, the devil led him up and showed him all the kingdoms of the world, offering power and dominion over them. Recognizing Jesus would not give into his physical hunger, the devil chooses the hunger of the ego to see if Jesus could be lured by the possibility of political power. Again, Jesus responds with scripture, "Worship the Lord your God and serve God alone."

Having no success with the lure of hunger or political power the devil tries one last time from the heights of the Jerusalem temple, "If you are the son of God, throw yourself down from here, surely God will save you from death." With scripture, again Jesus responds, "Do not put the Lord your God to the test."

In Luke's Gospel, this infamous tale of Jesus' temptation in the wilderness comes right after the baptism story and it continues the Gospel's theme of the work of the Holy Spirit. Remember the Spirit filled John the Baptizer and his mother, Elizabeth. The Spirit also filled Mary at the conception of Jesus and inspired Zechariah with a song. It was the Spirit who led Jesus to be baptized and the Spirit who descended upon him with the promise, "you are my Beloved Son" when he emerged and began to pray. Now, the Spirit leads Jesus into the wilderness and enables him to endure the temptations that await.

The temptations that await Jesus in his wilderness may not directly mirror the trials that we face in our lives. We cannot turn stone into bread. We do not have access to global political authority; and we cannot count on angels to break our fall should we decide to jump off the top of the church. But aren't we all tempted by the quick fixes that come our way? Wouldn't we rather provide for our own tables rather than asking ourselves why

126,000 people experience food insecurity in Wake County¹? Isn't it easier to go along with the thoughts and ideologies of our friends and neighbors – even when we are starting to believe that systemic change might be necessary? And isn't it tempting to imagine that with the best health care, the best doctors, and improvements in technology that we might live on forever? That certainly sounds good to me. Much better than coming to terms with my own mortality.

We are all tempted to choose the quick fix over the systemic solution, the one that puts self-interest over communal need, the one that requires us to worship to the gods of this world: money, power, fame, beauty, and longevity.²

These quick fix solutions come to us in many shapes and forms. In my middle school years, they looked like JNCO jeans and popular friends. As much as I'd like to think things have changed, I still facetime my best friend to make sure a new outfit looks OK. I still send a selfie from the dressing room at TJ Maxx to ask her if this looks professional or if it looks a little too "out there". Even as a grown woman, I still want to find ways to fit in.

And that's OK so long as I remember that the clothing I wear, the friends I keep, the neighborhood I live in, and the car I drive do not sum up who I am. They do not give me value, and they cannot help me *belong*. They might help me fit in for a little while but sooner or later who I am will begin to show through all of that outfitting.

In a 1973 interview with Bill Moyers, Maya Angelou said, "You are only free when you belong no place – you belong every place – no place at all. The price is high. The reward is great."³

It seems Maya has discovered the same truth that Jesus already knew. It seems she has learned that the things of this world that tempt us: materialism, power, and immortality, fool us into a false sense of belonging. They lure us with temporary friendships, temporary protections, and false promises that all will be well.

The more we seek to belong in any one particular place – whether it's with the popular crowd at school or the bosses at the office – the less we belong to ourselves and the less we belong to God. It is our human nature to desire belonging, to look for groups of similarity in which we can feel comfortable and at home. But that is not the full vision for the kingdom that God is creating and when we let that kind of belonging become the end goal toward which our whole lives are lived... well, we have missed the point.

¹ <http://www.foodbankcenc.org/site/DocServer/Wake.pdf?docID=3791>

² Amy-Jill Levine and Ben Witherington III. *The Gospel of Luke*. 103.

³ Brené Brown. *Braving the Wilderness*. 5.

The secret that I think both Jesus and Maya are trying to teach us is that we already belong. We don't need to fit into any particular group or any particular place at any given time because we already belong to God. And when we spend our time focusing on fitting in anywhere else, we are giving into the temptation to turn stone into bread.

In Luke's Gospel, Jesus' emergence from the wilderness marked the beginning of his ministry in Galilee. I wish Luke had told us a little more about what happened in those forty days. Did Jesus waiver back and forth? Did he struggle with the temptations that the devil brought before him? I suspect he did because the gospel says that he was tempted for forty days. We may never know what happened in that time of trial, but when Jesus emerges from the wilderness, he seems to have a new understanding of what it means to be God's beloved.

Immediately after the wilderness experience, he begins his Galilean ministry echoing the words of Isaiah saying:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
Because he has anointed me
To bring good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
And recovery of sight to the blind,
To let the oppressed, go free,
To proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.

It's as if Jesus' time in the wilderness reminded him of the blessing of belonging that he had received at baptism and the responsibility of that blessing to bring belonging to everyone else. It's as if Jesus could suddenly see the false groupings and pairings that existed in the world keeping people apart from one another:

Wealth and poverty, freedom and captivity, health and infirmity, and the list goes on.

In the same way, if Jesus were to emerge out of his wilderness and walk into our lives would he see some of the false groupings that we have created and that keep us apart from one another:

Tarheel and wolfpack, dark blue or light blue, urban and rural, old and young, rich and poor, educated and uneducated, male and female, black and white... and the list goes on.

It can feel really good to find a group of like-minded people. To fit in, to feel safe, to be able to share our opinions and know that everybody is going to support our ideas. But it is a scary thing when our entire worlds are made up of people in our groups of like-mindedness. We become echo-chambers of a single opinion and before too long, our groups begin to believe that our ideas are God's ideas, and we demonize all those who see things another way.

When we try find our belonging in groups like this, we are giving into the trials of our wilderness...

But we have to remember that just as the Spirit calls Jesus into the wilderness and then out into Galilee, so too are we called to come face our own temptations so that we might recognize them for what they are and then push them aside, choosing to belong nowhere so that we might belong anywhere and everywhere.

Belonging anywhere and everywhere means that we must reject false opportunities for group acceptance and press on toward Christ, noticing those whom the world has cast down, seeing those who are broken, holding those in need of comfort, and welcoming those who have no place to go.

When we belong nowhere, we are free because we belong to a God who is anywhere and everywhere.

Dr. Angelou learned her lesson of holy belonging years before the interview with Moyers in 1973. Her sense of holy belonging was not learned without its own wilderness experiences - and she talks about those in much of her work. But the amazing thing about Maya Angelou is that she was not content to receive the blessing of belonging and keep it for herself. She knew it didn't work that way and she built her legacy on telling others that they belonged too. Not because they were anything world said they should be... but because they were exactly who God made them to be, fashioned in God's holy image, and blessed with the words of the Holy Spirit: You are my beloved.

When the Spirit leads us into the wilderness, we do not know what trials and temptations are ahead. But we do know that the Spirit who leads us there will enable us with all that we need to reject the opportunities that promise false belonging because we know that before we ever step foot into the wild, we already belong. We do not need more material possessions, more social credibility, or more political power. We can no longer be tempted to belong in any one place. We already belong anywhere and everywhere, because we belong to God.

Benediction

As we leave this sanctuary,
this place of comfort,
 This holy refuge...

May we return boldly into our lives,
Embracing whatever wilderness the Spirit is leading us into...

And as we walk, may we walk

With confidence,
knowing that we are recipients of God's
blessing of holy belonging.

May we walk with courage,
Ready to welcome all whom we meet along the way

May we walk with peace, trusting that where the Spirit guides,
 The spirit will provide.

And may we walk in faith knowing that in every wilderness, Christ walks beside us, every
step of the way.

Amen.