

Even in the desert...

Sermon 135 | Greystone Baptist Church | March 6, 2022

Luke 4:1-13

Chile's Atacama Desert is one of the driest places on the planet. Receiving an average of only 2 millimeters of rainfall each year, this arid landscape stretches for more than 600 miles along the Pacific. For us, who are spoiled by the North Carolina beaches, the warm humid air, and the lush greenscape of our region, imagining such a place seems almost other-worldly. A place where rain never comes, where salt pans dry up at the foot of coastal mountains. A place where the land meets the ocean with arid cliffs rather than the slow transition from mountains to plains to flatlands that we experience here.

The inhospitable landscape of the Atacama Desert makes a lot of things - things that we take for granted – to be nearly impossible. For this reason, the land is basically uninhabitable for human beings and for other life forms that we might recognize. There are no urban centers, no suburban neighborhoods. There are no vegetable gardens or flowering hydrangeas, no magnolia trees or pine forests, no dogs, cats, or even squirrels. Everything is different in the desert, which can make it a neat place to read about or even visit, but a terrifying place to set up camp.

There is something deeply spiritual about the dry places though, the desert wildernesses that cover more than one-fifth of the earth's surface.¹ Much of traditional Christian thought comes from monks and nuns known as the desert fathers and mothers. These early followers embodied an ascetic spirituality that embraced simplicity, seclusion, and poverty. So they went into the deserts of Egypt (then a Roman province) and listened deeply to the voice of God. But why the desert?

Well, in the Bible, the desert is both an inhospitable place, a place of exile and punishment, but it is also what Celtic Christians would call a *thin space* – a place where heaven and earth draw near. Apparently John the Baptist felt the same way. He lived in the desert and found it to be a place of divine revelation.

Before him, Elijah called the desert home, venturing there to a cave on Mount Horeb (the same mountain Moses would call Sinai) when he needed to retreat from the difficult work of being a prophet to the Hebrew people.

The desert plays such a central role in the Exodus story that it almost becomes a character in itself. The Hebrew people were led into the desert after being liberated from slavery in Egypt. There they were frequently tested and attacked by the inhabitants of that land. There they suffered from hunger and thirst. There, their faith and commitment to God were tested day in and day out. But also there, God was present in the daily expressions of cloud and fire. Also there, they were fed by God-given manna and quail.

During this desert experience, God met Moses on Sinai and gave the ten commandments.

¹ <https://www.nationalgeographic.org/article/deserts-explained/>

But even before the Exodus, the desert welcomed Hagar as she escaped the wrath of Sarah. It was a place of retreat, a sanctuary where she and Ishmael were *seen and heard* by God.

The desert is a place of isolation and distance, but it is also a home for the weary, the poor, the outcast, and the runaway. In the Biblical tradition, even before Jesus, the desert is a place of solitude and revelation, a place of despair and closeness to God.

Jesus' experience would be no different. In Luke's Gospel, immediately following his baptism – a moment of affirmation and promise – Jesus is led into the wilderness by the Spirit. While he is there, he is tested by the devil, tempted by the age-old lures of physical health, wealth, power, and privilege. These are, after all, the best that the world has to offer.

When Jesus was fasting, the devil tempted him with bread, a temporary fix to alleviate the pain of his spiritual commitment. When Jesus was poor (an intentional social location Jesus would choose for his entire life), the devil tempted him with land, wealth, and the power that would accompany it. When Jesus was embracing his identity as God's beloved child, and as he sought clarity around what this vocation would mean, the devil tempted him to flaunt it, to take advantage of that privilege in a showy display of his divinity.

Yes, these are the best that the devil has to offer: the lures of personal satisfaction, power, and privilege.

On a good day, we can see these tempters for what they are. Superficial, quick fixes to our more existential and lifelong problems. On a good day we know that physical beauty and provision, like a loaf of bread in the desert, will not last, will not solve any problems, will not make the journey of life any easier. On a good day we know that acquiring and growing our wealth is not going to make our problems disappear. On a good day we know that our privilege may feel good, may protect us from certain inconveniences or worries, but in the end, it is that same privilege that will blind us from seeing God at work in our world. Yes, on a good day, we can spot these tempters coming and we can work to dodge them. But when we are in the desert, when we are in our most desperate places, their lure seems to have a bit more power.

You see, in the midst of our desert places, the dry and cracking earth beneath our feet can change our perspective and shift our focus away from the things that we know are more important. In our desert places, we feel alone, we feel worried, we feel anxious, we are in constant pain and often we will do anything to get out, to get back to normal. And so we are more prone to go after the quick fix of superficial nourishment, back to the comfort of financial stability, and back to the privileges that have protected us in the past. The desert is an inhospitable place, where change and disruption seem to lurk around every corner and so yes, of course, we are tempted by all the comforts of home. The desert is an opportune place for us to be swayed and distracted from what really matters most.

In many ways we have been living in a desert-like place. For at least two years now, we have collectively endured the threat of famine, desolation, and we have faced our own mortality. Along the way – because it has been an opportune time – we have been tempted to divert our attention, to hoard up supplies and food in case a shortage would come. To fill our accounts with money and to invest in our properties to ensure that our wealth would not be depleted. We have been tempted to hide behind our privileges of race, gender, politics and social networks in order that we might cushion ourselves from the rollercoaster economy and the pain of seeing the brokenness in our systems.

This is indeed an opportune time for the temptations to seep back in, luring us away from the Gospel, from the Love of Christ, from the humility that is required to follow in his footsteps. This is indeed a desert season.

I didn't realize – before doing a little research this week – that deserts don't all look the same. Some are hot and sandy, others are cold and salty. They don't all look like what we imagine or see on TV, rolling hills of nothing but brown sand blowing in the wind. No, for a place to be called a desert, the only thing that matters is it's dry-ness.

Spiritually speaking, the same is true. Each of our deserts are tailored to our own unique experiences. Sometimes they are brought on by death or divorce. Sometimes they arrive with a job or a season of unemployment. Sometimes they look like loneliness or co-dependency. Sometimes they are brought on by the stress of raising our children. Sometimes the desert feels like shame or guilt over something that happened in our past. Sometimes it feels like fatigue, when we are not sure how much more we can handle. The desert is any place where we feel close to our breaking point, any place where we are tempted by a quick fix, where we are grasping for anything, *anything*, that will get us out of the difficult situation we are in, anything that will end the pain and the struggle, and bring us back to the comfort of home, of normal, of what used to be or what we *thought* it might be.

The desert is place of despair.

But if we remember the stories from scripture, we can place our hope in the biblical testimony that the desert is also a place where God is near. It is a place of provision, revelation, a place of transformation, and unparalleled possibility.

It is a place of proximity, a thin place, where heaven and earth feel close to one another as we rely more on God than ever before.

Chile's Atacama Desert is so dry, inhospitable, and other-worldly, that scientists travel there to study for clues that might help them learn more about life on Mars. Yes, you heard that right. Scientists study in the Atacama to further their efforts to explore another planet. It is that strange and dry a region.

But... every few years, the stars align in such a way that rain *does* come to the Atacama. In these special years, when certain natural forces all match up, rain comes and in the

springtime the floor of the Atacama becomes blanketed in blooming wildflowers. The media calls this phenomenon a “superbloom” and such events can occur in many of the worlds desert lands. Somehow, the seeds, roots, and underground sources of life can survive even the driest conditions as they wait for the rain to come. And when it does, the result is breathtakingly beautiful.

These flowering masterpieces remind us that even when things seem dire and the ground beneath our feet seems to be cracking and crumbling to pieces, the roots and seeds of beauty are still being sewn. The God who created us is still working to bring forth new life. And everything that is needed for survival *is* being provided, even though it may be harder to see than usual.

So we don't have to chase after the temptations that come our way. In fact, the old, false promises of health, wealth, power, and privilege will only *prevent us* from seeing the superbloom that God wants to grow among us. A flowering of justice, freedom, peace, and most of all love – a world that looks like God's kingdom more than our kingdom. A bloom of unparalleled and unimaginable beauty. A bloom that requires us to wait and trust and cling to the promise that despite all evidence to the contrary, God *is* with us, even here, even now... even in the desert.