

The First Step(s)

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Sermon Series:

**Pathways: The Distance
Between the Promise and the
Present**

**Text: Deuteronomy 26:1-11;
Luke 4:1-13**

The story Luke tells us today is a hard one. The desert is a dangerous place. Jesus has been there for a good while, 40 days. And it appears that during this time, the devil has been there too, tempting Jesus. And finally, at the end, when Jesus has had no food, no company, and he's exhausted, the devil "tests" Jesus three times. And then departs from him.

Contrast that with the story we hear in Deuteronomy. The people are in the Promised Land—the land that God has given to them. It is a land flowing with milk and honey, full of good things, and the people are together and content. They are rejoicing, worshipping, and God dwells with them.

These are two very different scenes, and the obvious question is, what in the world do they have to do with each other? What could these possibly have in common?

Today, we begin a sermon series that will take us through Lent, up to Easter, on "Pathways: The Distance Between the Promise and the Present." The idea began as a way to explore the disconnect between the promises we receive—promises like those the people enjoy in Deuteronomy—and the present we experience, which can sometimes seem like Jesus' experience in the desert. We would walk the road to the cross with Jesus, through the desert time, to get to the promise—the joy of the resurrection at Easter.

It sounded like an interesting idea, at least to me, but as I've looked at these passages for today and even in the coming weeks, I've noticed that the "distance" between the Promised Land and the present desert are not as far apart as they seem. They have more in common than you might think.

And I realized that might be because the road we

travel as Christian disciples has less to do with the destination, and more to do with our transformation as we journey together, with each other and with God.

To be clear, there *is* a gap, a distance if you will, between the promise and the present. I don't need to tell you that, especially after the events of the last few weeks. But in our lives, we experience a little bit of both I think, often in the same situation. And so the journey is ongoing. But it always begins with a first step.

Jesus' steps led him into the wilderness, immediately following his baptism, as a matter of fact. Just after this awesome, affirming scene where he is claimed by God, Jesus ends up in the wilderness.

Now, we've heard it before, but I'll say it again. . . the wilderness is a dangerous place.

I've been to the wilderness, both the one Jesus' likely spent time in and the one the Israelites traveled through. It is a barren place—there is no food, except the food you might have brought yourself, and no water; there is no one else, you are alone, at the mercy of circumstance and wild animals; there is no shelter, not even a small piece of shade, and there is no help.

It is desolate, and disorienting, and desperate.

I don't know what “wilderness” times you might have experienced in your life, but I fairly confident we've all been there.

We find ourselves alone in situations, physically and emotionally. We are starving for connection, for comfort, for hope. We don't know which way is up and all we're looking for is a way out.

We wonder where God is, and that, of course, is precisely when the devil shows up.

In the story in Luke, the circumstances seem convoluted. It says that Jesus was in

the wilderness “where for 40 days he was tempted by the devil”, but it appears that these three “tests” of the devil don't happen until after that point.

But I think maybe that's how the devil works in the wilderness—wearing us down with temptation until we are desperate—and then come the “tests.”

Jesus is tested three times. In the first test, the devil attempts to use Jesus' hunger—he is literally starving at this point—against him. He says, “turn this stone into bread.”

It sounds impossible, and yet we actually attempt this, for some of us, it's a way of life. In our spiritual hunger, we seek after the wrong things. We hunger for status, and we gather up stones of accomplishments or knowledge or positions. We are starved for love, and we gather up stones of lust and casual relationships. We hunger for worth, and we gather up stones of money and acquisition.

And in our anxiety, in our perception that we are really out in this wilderness by ourselves and so we must fend for ourselves, we hoard these stones as if they were treasure. We get caught up in gathering stones, in keeping them, in gnawing on them for nourishment, and we never look around to see who else might be hungry.

But, friends, stones are hard to chew and they sit heavy in your gut. They don't fill you up so much as weigh you down. Stones are not something you want to pack for the journey.

But Jesus' answer to the devil is our answer as well: “One does not live by bread alone.” God provides. God gives us status as children of God, loves us before we are even born, chooses us before the foundation of the world.

And what God provides isn't hard, or

heavy, or burdensome—it fills us up and sends us out, and it overflows out of us to others. There is more than enough to go around, and it even seems to increase as we share it—when we affirm one another for who we are, when we love one another as we are, when we encourage and comfort one another where we are.

We have everything we need for the journey. God provides.

If Jesus’ first test has to do with provision, then Jesus’ second test has to do with power. The devil shows him all the kingdoms of the world, and says “to you I will give their glory, and all this authority.” Now *this* is a temptation, friends, one not too far from our own lives.

We seek after our own glory all the time, but sometimes in the most subtle of ways. We are afraid that we are not capable, or that God is not capable. That there won’t be a place or a purpose for us in God’s kingdom. And so we build our own kingdoms—out of our careers, our homes and families, even our church committees. And we are masters of our own domains. We don’t even worship the devil, we worship ourselves, and I’m not sure which is worse.

We get so caught up in building and ruling our little empires that we forget to keep moving. Kingdoms are not conducive to the journey.

This time, Jesus answers, “Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.” God is powerful. And God is able.

Our kingdoms eventually crumble—unemployment looms, marriages fail, churches (or factions of them) dissolve in conflict. We are displaced, or deposed, from our positions of authority. But God always has a place for

us in his kingdom, and a purpose, and a glory that lasts—because it is from God.

Our marching orders come from God, and we work toward a kingdom built by God. For the glory of God.

But the devil tests Jesus a third time. He takes Jesus up to the pinnacle of the temple in Jerusalem, the highest holiest place around, and asks Jesus to take the ultimate leap of faith. The devil taunts Jesus, mocks him and his God, saying “He will command his angels concerning you. . . on their hands they will bear you up.” It’s almost like he’s daring him.

And in our lives, this is perhaps the most nefarious test of all. Because it’s a no-win situation.

When we end up at the pinnacle points of our life, we have a choice. We can stay where we are, clinging tightly to the steeple (I don’t think it’s an accident that this happens at the temple, by the way), refusing to give God a chance to do something amazing and wonderful and miraculous, “because we’ve never done it that way before.”

Or we can jump, but a leap of faith can often quickly turn into a free fall, where we are bargaining with God for something we were never promised in the first place, and angry and disillusioned when God doesn’t deliver—as if God promised success in return for supposed obedience.

We can’t win, because either way, we’re listening to the devil. If we don’t jump, we don’t give God a chance, and if we do jump, we bind God’s hands to our will.

But the journey is not about temples and monuments and pinnacles. It’s less about leaps of faith, and more about steps in faith. And God protects us on that journey.

So, Jesus answers the devil once and for

all. “Do not put the Lord your God to the test.” Which sounds like the end of the story. And indeed, the devil departs from Jesus “until an opportune time.” But I have to wonder, if the wilderness—the time when Jesus is weakest—isn’t an opportune time, then what is?

Which is where we intersect our Old Testament reading. I said these have more in common than it sounds like, and I want to suggest to you that perhaps the devil can be just as active in the Promised Land as in the wilderness.

The devil isn’t testing God in the wilderness, which is what the devil would have us believe. The devil is testing us, and his weapon is fear. Fear that we will not have enough, that we are not enough, that we cannot do enough.

And the answer to that fear is trust—trust in God’s provision, in God’s power, in God’s protection. Because the devil is right, that’s what makes him so effective—in and of ourselves, we cannot have enough, be enough, do enough—but that’s not the devil’s trick.

The devil’s tactic is to expose our own incapacity, impotence, and insecurity, and then make us believe that God is not enough for us. That God cannot provide, possess, and protect us sufficiently. And we live in a culture of anxiety and fear that supports the devil’s lies so effectively.

But in the Promised Land, the devil uses another approach. Our reading in Deuteronomy rehearses the Israelites’ salvation history.

God provides—a land flowing with milk and honey. God is powerful—he brings them out of Egypt with a mighty hand and outstretched arm, with signs and wonders. God protects—he heard their voice and saw their affliction, and he rescued them. So where is the devil?

Well, he’s not in this story, but he does

show up later on. The Israelites begin to take God’s provision for granted, and they store up riches for themselves, they build ornate temples, they amass wealth. And they end up with a sense of entitlement.

The prophets are full of God’s pronouncements against their systems that support owners and oppress laborers, against people who go through the motions of religious practice and ignore the widow and orphan in their midst, about a nation who was not content with what it had and so through might and fight, sought to acquire more. Sound familiar?

We live in a culture where we have somehow mistaken God’s generous gift for what we deserve. And ironically, in doing that, we end up turning our bread back into stones.

Our hardness of heart is not unlike the Israelites. When we have too much, it’s easy to forget that God is enough.

The Israelites take God’s power for granted as well, assume it for themselves, until they become arrogant. All during the salvation history of Israel, through Joshua and Judges, God gives the people their land, but reminds them that the people they are getting it from are their “kin”—fellow children of God—and they are to treat them kindly.

Fast forward a few hundred years, and then a few thousand years, and you see a culture with very little tolerance for weakness or difference. A society that believes that might makes right. Like the Israelites, we overstep ourselves—we push out people who do not measure up, or do not agree with us. We’ve corrupted God’s kingdom with our own ambition, with our arrogance. When we are too full of ourselves, it’s easy to forget that God is enough.

Which leaves us with God’s protection.

And the Israelites, free from the oppression of Egypt and the struggle of the desert, quickly get used to feeling safe. So safe, in fact, that they become complacent. And when we are complacent, the devil is at his best, because we hardly notice him at all.

The Israelites, brought into the Promised Land to bring glory to God and be a people of God, quickly begin to assume the habits of the world around them. They forget their own religious practices, their spiritual disciplines, and slide into some other practices that are less about God and more about their own comfort.

At best, this leads to spiritual stagnation, and at worst, to a religion of us—in which we don’t need God because we can save ourselves. When we do too much for ourselves, we forget that God is enough.

Yes, the devil is in the promise too. If the weapon of the devil in the desert is fear, then in the Promised Land, it’s idolatry.

In the desert, we worry that we will not have enough, be enough, do enough, and we forget that God is enough. But when we have too much, are too much, do too much, we also forget that God is enough.

These two places are not very far apart at all. The devil will use either, but they have something else in common as well.

In Deuteronomy, it is clear that God is leading the people into the Promised Land—God is providing, God is protecting, God is powerful.

But let’s look back at the passage in Luke. It’s easy to miss, it’s in the first sentence, but God is there too. “Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness. . . .”

God is leading in the wilderness too—providing, protecting, empowering. So how do we get there from here? And what do we do

along the way?

We can look back to the response of the people in Deuteronomy for clues. God commands them to come before the priest and to “bow down before the Lord your God. Then you, together with the holy people and the aliens who reside among you, shall celebrate with all the bounty that the Lord your God has given to you and your house.”

That’s how we get there from here, no matter where here or there is, no matter where we encounter the devil.

Whether we have too much or too little, God provides. So we share what we have—together with the holy people and the aliens—and trust that God is enough.

Whether we are too much or not enough, God is powerful. So we seek God—and bow down before the Lord—and believe that God is enough.

Whether we do too much or cannot do enough, God protects. So we celebrate—with all—and know that God is enough.

And if those activities sound familiar, that’s what we do in worship each week and what we charge you to do as you leave this place for your homes, your businesses, this community—love the Lord and love the people, serve the Lord and serve the people. It’s what we’ll do in heaven according to Revelation. Share, seek, celebrate.

Our worship and our service prepare us for the journey, sustain us on the way, and mark our arrival in the promise. The practices of the community of faith are our train ticket, our road map, and our way home.

We just need to take the first step, knowing that God will go with us every step of the way.

In Deuteronomy, the people rehearse their history, “a wandering Aramean was my ances-

tor; he went down into Egypt and lived there as an alien.” But God led them into the promise, just as God led Jesus into the wilderness, and just as God leads us now.

The journey is both our heritage and our home. God has been with us in the past. God is in the promise and the present. God is leading the way. And God is always enough.