

First Presbyterian Church
Matthew 4:1-11, “Wilderness: Day and Night”
by Pastor Matt Johnson, 2/22/2026

I remember being led by my father into the wilderness for the first time.
At the trailhead, he took a moment to explain to me that
where we were going, there were no roads.
There were no vehicles allowed at all.
There would be no homes. There were no maintained campgrounds.
There were no water stations. There were not even toilets.
This was simply the wild forest of the Cascades Mountains
with some trails in it.
We could move through it and camp in it,
but there were no external supports available.
And there were real dangers to be cautious of.
Cougars, bears, and getting lost were highest on my list,
but my dad seemed to be more worried about
sliding down hills by running too fast.
It was just us in the land on our own, day and night.

This information took some time to process.
I hadn't realized that we were making such a stark break from civilization.
We were entering into a unique and solitary kind of experience
that would test our skills for survival.
This sparked in me a sense of possibility and wonder.

Jesus also was led into the wilderness for a time of testing.
The Holy Spirit initiated this journey, and Jesus responded faithfully,
accepting the invitation.
I think this is worth noting. Jesus was not commanded to do this.
He was not forced. He was led,
which implies that Jesus was a willing participant
in following the Spirit's call...
even though the purpose was to be tempted by the devil.

At least that's how the devil saw it, because the deceiver sought Jesus' downfall.
But we know that's not what God wanted.
From God's perspective it was a time of testing of Jesus' readiness
for the everyday temptations of his ministry.

And so Jesus went into the wilderness for 40 days and 40 nights.
That's a lot longer than I was out there with my dad.
But it's the same length as our season of Lent.

Now I've preached this passage many times,
so I thought I knew the other references to 40 days and 40 nights,
but it turns out there are more than I was aware of.

CHART on SLIDES:

Noah in the ark. Gen. 7:12, "And rain fell on the earth forty days and forty nights."

Moses #1 Confirming the covenant when the glory of the Lord settled on Mt. Sinai in cloud, Ex. 24:18, "Moses entered the cloud on the mountain. And he stayed on the mountain forty days and forty nights."

Moses #2, fasted alone 40 days and nights atop Mt. Sinai as he wrote down a new set of the 10 Commandments. Ex. 34:28, "Moses was there with the Lord forty days and forty nights without eating bread or drinking water. And he wrote on the tablets the words of the covenant -- the Ten Commandments"

Elijah while fleeing to Mt. Horeb (Sinai), 1 Kings 19:8-9, "Strengthened by that food, he traveled forty days and forty nights until he reached Horeb, the mountain of God. There he went into a cave and spent the night."

40 years of wilderness wandering for Israel, Deut. 8:2, "Remember how the Lord your God led you all the way in the wilderness these forty years, to humble and test you in order to know what was in your heart, whether or not you would keep his commands."

Jesus, 40 days and 40 nights in the wilderness.

Every mention of the 40 day period also mentions the nights.

It's always 40 days and 40 nights.

Why always with the days *and* the nights?

There's a big difference between daytime in the wilderness and nighttime in the wilderness...

If you're searching for someone who is lost...
if sleeping alone...
if you are on the run...
if you don't have adequate shelter...
nighttime represents its own world, its own set of needs / dangers.

There is the cold of night. There are nocturnal animals.
And of course, there is the fact of the darkness itself.

Darkness has spiritual connotations as well.

Barbara Brown Taylor writes,

"I guess that depends on what color your monsters' eyes are.

Most people do not know what they mean by 'darkness'
except that they want to stay out of it.

Just say the word and the associations begin to flow: night, nightmare, ghost,
graveyard, cave, bat, vampire, death, devil, evil, criminal, danger, doubt,
depression, loss, fear. Fear is the main thing."

I think this is why all these references speak of 40 days and 40 nights.

When we're being formed by God in the desert,
we don't get to escape the dark.

The reason these biblical characters are prepared both day and night
is that our real-life challenges include day and night.

Our faith has to be ready to hold up in the darkness—
both literal darkness and the figurative darkness
that we encounter.

And so we see that Jesus time in the desert also included the dark.

But when we open ourselves to a time of testing, day and night,
we also open ourselves to being surprised by the goodness
that arrives in the dark.

For Jesus, the devil tempted him with chances to
unleash his divine powers to serve his human fears
of not being enough and not having enough.

The testing of his faith in the dark brought him to the Scriptures of Israel
which shined a light for him to find a safe path when
the devil tried to blur the distinction
between God-like power and God's true purpose.

And now we are invited to enter into a wilderness season with the Holy Spirit
for 40 days and 40 nights from Ash Wednesday to Easter Sunday.
(However, we do get breaks: there are also 6 days of rest
added in with each Sunday.)

I know that there is darkness in your life as well.
Things that you fear. Things that you can't fully articulate or understand.
Temptations that you feel you cannot resist.
Lent is a time when God invites you to encounter those things
and be tested by them, so that you can learn to trust
God day and night. How do we do that?

There are many kinds of spiritual wilderness experiences, and
it would be unwise to try them all at once.
If someone tells you "Next week I'm going to go backpacking, kayaking,
rock-climbing and search for endangered species
all by myself in the Cascade Mountains."
I would say, "Um...are you sure about that?"

It's more beneficial to discern an area or two to focus on.
If you were to step into the wilderness with the Spirit of God during Lent,
what sort of wilderness experience might you be confronted with?

SLIDE:

If you're up for entering the wilderness, here are some areas for you to consider:

Exploration: What question would you bring to God in prayer?

What book, resource, or conversation could you draw upon?

Lament: What wound or disruption do you need to name?

Canting: What song or mantra would you repeat as you walk?

Unburdening: What heavy weight, obstacle or pattern of life
might you confess and repent of?

Training: What form of prayer, fasting, silence,
or other spiritual practice might you take up?

Attending: What might you focus on, watch for,
pay attention to along with the Holy Spirit?

Creating: What new activity could you take up as a reminder
of God's creative work in the wilderness?

No one will make you enter the wilderness during Lent. It's your choice.
But if you choose to go, I encourage you to follow the Biblical pattern
and undertake these practices day and night,

I mean that we must be ready to be formed by the Spirit when we are energetic,
focused, enthused, and clearly seeing the path before us –
and also when we are weak, hungry, lost,
and cannot see the way forward.

We read in Matthew 4 that Jesus is tested and does not fail.
That's because ... he's Jesus.

Jesus had to demonstrate the capacity to be an entirely faithful human being,
to fulfill the promises made to Israel without giving into temptation
of using his divine qualities in self-serving ways.

But you aren't Jesus. I'm not Jesus. We will fail.
That's not only okay, it's expected and it can be beneficial.
We can fall short in our time of testing and learn
about who we are and whose we are, which results in growth.

Don't give up on a spiritual practice simply because "it feels too hard,"
or "I keep messing up so what's the point?"
Instead, we can recognize that you are entering the darkness and pray,
"God, it feels too hard. I can't do the thing I said I would do.
I really want to eat or drink the thing I'm fasting from
and I cheated several times.

I said I would read a psalm every day and I've forgotten to do it 5 out of 7 days.
I feel like I'm failing this test – will you support me and encourage me
so that I can keep going?"

If we enter into the wilderness we should *expect* for things to go wrong!
You don't just leave because you got a hole in your tent.
Patch it up and find a way to keep going!

Why does this matter? Because the real-life darkness we encounter –
cancer diagnosis, broken promises, being rejected, feeling hopeless,
suffering, violence, financial insecurity, anxiety and depression –
these are immensely difficult to move through.

If our faith has only been tested in the most pristine of conditions,
it is unlikely to hold up. God will still be with us (!),
but we will feel frightened and unprepared.

We need a spirituality that has been tested day and night
so that we can discern God's voice when true darkness arrives.

When we know we are held by God in the darkness,
the stars of night can shine out in the most astonishing ways.

Closing Prayer: (from Black Liturgies by Cole Arthur Riley)

God of sacred darkness,
When the sun sets and the night stretches before us,
we are so quick to turn on the lights--some of us stricken
by fear and anxiety, some by restlessness.
We are unwilling to slow down, the way our bodies are meant to do in the dark.
As we retreat from the bright artificial lights of our days,
make us grateful for the skies sacred dark,
which suspends the stars above us.
That light is made lovely by blackness reminds us
of the beauty of tension and harmony.

And may we remember our own smallness and relationship to this glory;
that we are one small and necessary fragment in the cosmic community.
No greater or less than the sky that covers us or the beetle underfoot.
May this beauty secure us in our creational belonging
and steady us in divine company.