

“Tempted in the Wilderness”

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¹Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. ²He fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished. ³The tempter came and said to him, “If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread.” ⁴But he answered, “It is written, ‘One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.’” ⁵Then the devil took him to the holy city and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, ⁶saying 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.’” ⁷Jesus said to him, “Again it is written, ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’” ⁸Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor; ⁹and he said to him, “All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me.” ¹⁰Jesus said to him, “Away with you, Satan! for it is written, ‘Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.’” ¹¹Then the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him. (Matthew 4:1-11)

This past week, we spent some time in the wilderness. The high desert of southern Arizona and the northern state of Sonora in Mexico is a range of sharp volcanic mountains separated by wide stretches of flat barren valley. The reddish, burnt orange soil of those valleys is dry and rocky, except in the ditches and washes where rainwaters quickly gather when strong storms roll through. Varieties of cactus pop up sporadically, but the primary flora are low, dry patches of grass that cover the ground. Less numerous are short, spiny “palo verde” trees and the straight thorny sticks of the ocotillo plant. In the spring and summer, they burst forth with thousands of tiny green leaves and bold yellow or red flowers, but during the fall and winter months they are bare and brittle and prickly. And, of course, the occasional tumbleweed bounces by in the strong desert wind. It is all exactly what we likely think of when we hear the word “wilderness”: uncultivated, uninhabited, inhospitable. A human passing through that wasteland would find no water, no food, and precious little shelter from wind, weather, or predators.

The first time our feet touched this hostile ground was at the foot of what many in the United States simply call The Wall: rust-colored steel bars sunk vertically into the desert floor, firmly secured by concrete, and sometimes adorned with row upon row of spiraled razor wire. For that first up-close view, I wouldn’t say we were in the wilderness *per se*. We were standing in the center of a large metropolitan area, the top half of which is known as the city of Douglas, Arizona, population 16,531¹ -- and the bottom section the Mexican town of Agua Prieta (“dark water”), population 79,138.² The spot was densely populated, but even here there were whispers of desolation and wildness, a sense of a conflict that may be calm for the moment, but still present in small hints of a deeper drama... a winter cap snagged in the razor wire... a single running shoe hung up in a bush... a humble shrine built for a young man named Carlos who had been shot and killed on the

¹ 2020 Census data, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Douglas,_Arizona

² 2010 Census data, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Agua_Prieta.



American side of the fence... and white and green vehicles constantly on patrol -- watching, waiting, and monitoring every movement.

But our real experience in the wilderness came on Thursday, our last full day at the border. As we did every morning, we woke up in our dormitory at the Lily of the Valley Church in Agua Prieta, enjoyed a hot, delicious local breakfast, and went across the street for our morning devotion at Café Justo, a coffee shop run by a local co-op that serves as a meeting spot for all kinds of volunteers, mission workers, and locals who love a good cappuccino. After a brief tour of a local rehab facility that is a sermon for another day, we loaded back into the van and headed out of town to the west. We followed a pickup truck led by two guides whose task that day was to take us out into the wilderness of the southern side of The Wall. Both of them had, in previous days, served a powerful local cartel that had long ago abandoned the smuggling of drugs over the border in favor of traffic in a much more lucrative commodity – people. These two men had served as armed field chaperones, ladder wranglers, and rappelling guides for groups of people who had no choice but to pay tens of thousands of dollars for just a chance to get across to a new life, a safer life, a more hopeful life, on the other side of The Wall. But now, these former criminals serve ministries like Frontera de Cristo, hoping to share the story of that wilderness in an honest but hopeful way.

I find it providential that the standard lectionary passage for this first Sunday of Lent is the story of the forty days that Jesus spent in the wilderness. It is one of the ways that our Savior shows himself truly to be Emmanuel, or “God With Us,” as he experiences the all-too-human struggles of hunger, thirst, and danger in an uncultivated, uninhabited, and inhospitable place. In the midst of this difficulty, Jesus is presented with three “temptations.” The Greek word *πειράζω* (*pi-rad'-zo*) means to test, or to prove,³ in the way that a metal alloy might be tested for strength -- to see if it was true, fully bonded, and ready to bear the weight that it would be called upon to bear.

I would label these tests with three “P’s.” First was the test of **Provision**. In the wilderness, Jesus was hungry, and he was invited to corrupt his heavenly mission by satisfying his own needs. “*If you are the Son of God,*” the tempter says, “*command these stones to become loaves of bread.*” Jesus is tempted to fill his own belly, alleviate his own pain, with a self-centered use of a power that is meant to help all.

The second test was about **Protection**. “*If you are the Son of God,*” the tempter taunts again, “*throw yourself down*” from this high and dangerous pinnacle and see if God’s angels really will save you. In other words, Jesus was invited to use his privileged status to call down the power of heaven for his own sake. If he did so, he would be acting as if God was in his pocket, that God was there just to serve his own personal needs, even if that meant forsaking the needs of others.

And the final test is about **Power**. The tempter took Jesus up to a mountaintop where he could see the bounty and splendor of the whole world. “*All of this I will give you,*” the tempter says, “*if you will fall down and worship me.*” Take it all for yourself, the tempter says. “It is here for the taking; all you have to do is grab it.”

As you know, Jesus passes each of these tests, proving his mettle and establishing here, at the beginning of his active earthly ministry. Through endurance and commitment, and by choosing selfless love over selfish gain, he reveals a strength of will that was true,

³ <https://biblehub.com/greek/3985.htm>

fully bonded, and ready to bear the weight that it would be called upon to bear.

The group that had the privilege to spend some time in the wilderness this past week will have much more to share and to say in the weeks and months ahead. Today, all I really want to share as a member of that group is that, if our brief and sheltered walk through the Sonoran wilderness showed us anything, it was that the struggle of those who dare to walk that wilderness each night-- braving heat, cold, hunger, thirst, and danger in search of a better life and a greater hope – is not just theirs. In no way are they the only ones who are being tested.

No, we are all being tempted and tested. And not just those of us who were there in body: those of us who gathered under the branches of an oak known as the Tree of Life, where countless travelers have paused to get a last drink of precious water, or perhaps some minor medical help, before running the final stretch of ground...

... those of us whose hearts beat faster as we ducked down into the same ditches used by migrants to avoid detection from the cameras on the mountains to the north...

... those of us whose lungs burned as we dashed through thorn bushes to try and keep up the pace...

... those of us whose arms, hands, and faces were cut by blades of desert grass as we ran as fast as we could to the base of The Wall.

Even for us, it was largely imaginary... an exercise to build empathy and understanding and compassion. But that exercise is something that we all have to do. We are all being tempted in this wilderness, even if our only contact with immigration policy is to read the papers, or post online, or chat over the dinner table. Whether we realize it or not, regardless of whether we are ready to accept it or not, the wilderness of our southern border is the site of our own testing and temptation – right here, and right now.

Yes, it is a thorny issue. Yes, it has complexities and nuances and grey areas. And when I say what I am about to say, know that I am not speaking as one trying to make a political statement, but simply as one who feels called to share what I have seen, and heard, and felt over the past week with my own eyes and ears, in my own bones, and in my own cuts and scratches. This wilderness at the border is tempting and testing us to ask how we feel, and how we should act, when it comes to our own Provision... our own Protection... our own Power.

Will we use our own privilege and position to care only for our Provision – our own needs and wants?

Will we think only of Protecting ourselves, or do we have a broader calling to love God and neighbor in a more daring way?

Will we grab Power for ourselves, or will we risk sharing it in the name of God?

This is not just a test for Douglas, Arizona, or for Agua Prieta, Mexico, or for politicians and missionaries around the world. It is your test and my test. And in this wilderness of the border -- be it in our memory, or just in our imagination -- we are being invited to prove our own strength, our own character, and our own commitment to God el Padre, el Hijo, y el Espíritu Santo. **Amen.**