

The Reverend Jon Hauerwas - More Than Bread - March 1, 2020 Genesis 2 and 3 and Matthew 4:1-11

According to Matthew, Jesus begins his earthly ministry in the wilderness. And while we might imagine a lush, forested area, in Greek, the word for wilderness could just as accurately be translated as desert. This is a semi-arid place serving as the untamed home of scorpions and spiders, jackals and snakes. It is populated with only those shrubs that are resilient enough to survive in such harsh conditions. This land is synonymous with seclusion.

When I was in high school, groups of students would often drive out into the countryside on Saturday nights. This is where you would go if you didn't want to be seen. And there, beyond the prying eyes of parents and other authority figures, young people were tempted to relax the boundaries of their ethical convictions.

As we mature, most of us put those kinds of experiences in the rearview mirror. But we would be lying to ourselves if we were to suggest that temptation is relegated to our youth. Today, countless numbers of adults seem to believe that our worth is derived either from what we produce or from what we own. To this end, we often put work before family, buy things that we really don't need, or go into debt for reasons that we will later regret. Some of us are tempted to eat too much junk

food, to stay up too late, or to ignore the signs that our current lifestyle is having a negative impact on our health. No matter our age, temptation abounds. And no matter what our profession, each of us is well acquainted with the wilderness.

There is a documentary style series on the National Geographic Channel called *Drugs, Inc.* The program explores global narcotics production and trafficking and features a wide range of participants. There are drug dealers and curriers, gangs and cartels, individuals who rob stash houses, and those who sell illegal firearms. The cameras follow prostitutes, recreational drug users, panhandlers, and addicts. And there are interviews with professionals in the fields of substance abuse, drug rehabilitation, and criminal justice.

In watching this series, several themes quickly emerge. Prominent among them are greed and the love of money, the temptation for power and control, and the callousness associated with profiting from the sorrows of others. Dealers are paranoid about being robbed, paranoid about others moving into their territory, and paranoid about being arrested by the police.

Meanwhile, users, addicts, and so-called testers, cycle back and forth between fleeting moments of incredible highs and the crippling consequences of withdrawal

and dependency. Each risk their lives by ingesting, smoking, or injecting substances that have been cut and mixed so many times with so many different products and by so many different hands that they have little knowledge about the actual contents of their next, mind-altering encounter.

Dealers readily discuss how they are destroying the lives of others. But they have also become experts in cognitive dissonance. “Sure, the drugs are so powerful that it will make them rob their own mother,” one dealer boasts, “but I’m giving my customers what they need, and I’m making a lot of money doing it. It’s really all about the money. You have to stay hungry.”

The addicts, much like the dealers, remain hungry. They openly discuss how the desire to keep using is markedly more powerful than they ever could have imagined. Several recount a series of previous overdoses. And it is common to hear about how every resource has been expended in an effort to feed a hunger that will never be satisfied.

On both ends of this spectrum is a certain escapism. Young, under-educated men wish to be respected in their communities. They desire a middle-class lifestyle that low-wage service jobs cannot provide. The drug trade makes sense to them

because it provides them with an alternative, supplying quick cash, instant prestige, and the illusions of power and control.

Users and addicts, meanwhile, are also seeking to escape their reality. Sensing little hope for their future, they are searching for a way to ease their pain. To calm their nerves and fears. To be transported from disappointment to ecstasy.

Back in the desert wilderness, Jesus, too, is hungry. He is busy preparing himself for the temptations that lie ahead. He does so by observing a forty-day fast. In essence, he adopts a faithful practice that is intended to draw him closer to God. By temporarily reducing his food intake, he learns to rely on more than bread alone.

According to physician Alan Lieberson, a healthy, well-nourished individual can survive for weeks without food, with claims ranging from three to ten weeks.¹ Matthew claims that following his forty day fast, Jesus is still alive. But he is also, in one of the Bible's great understatements, "famished." And it is here, in the midst

¹ Ravilious, Kate (27 December 2005). "[How long can someone survive without water?](#)". *The Guardian*. "People can last a few days without water depending on the environment in which they find themselves and whether [they are] injured or not," says Jeremy Powell-Tuck, professor of clinical nutrition at Barts and the London Queen Mary school of medicine, who supervised Blaine's recovery. Lieberson (MD), Alan. "[How long can a person survive without food?](#)". *Scientific American*.

of unimaginable hunger, that Satan appears. “If you are the Son of God,” the tempter challenges, then “command these stones to become loaves of bread.”

Despite the cover provided by his remote location, Jesus is not interested. He declines Satan’s offer, which is then quickly followed by two additional temptations. As one theologian observes, the devil’s overtures are meant to force Jesus to acknowledge that our world is dominated by fear and scarcity.

Satan wants him to affirm that we lack enough food, enough power, and even enough life itself. Jesus resists this temptation because he is the personification of God’s abundance. Instantly recognizing that Satan’s claims are a lie, Jesus’ resistance marks the beginning of his commitment to ensuring that fear and scarcity will not have the last word.²

Friends, today is the first Sunday in Lent. On this occasion, we have come to be reminded of our human frailty. And with it, we have come to acknowledge every form of idolatry and escapism that is lurking in the shadows. There we find excessive

² Stanley Hauerwas, *Matthew, Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible*, ed. R.R. Reno (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2006), 55.

working and worrying, excessive shopping and senseless debt, in addition to the incredible demands that we place upon ourselves and others.

In Lent, we acknowledge that security is not to be found in our achievements, as if we could earn our merit, but in the gracious forgiveness of our Lord. And we affirm, once again, that repentance has much in common with the path trod by recovering addicts. It all begins with “admitting that we are powerless to manage our lives, and that only a higher power can restore us.”³ For we do not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God. May it be so, and all thanks be to God. Amen.

³ William Loyd Allen, *Connections: A Lectionary Commentary for Preaching and Worship, Year A, Volume 2, Lent through Pentecost*, ed. Joel B. Green (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2019), 22.