

Rev. Mike Cole
Providence Presbyterian Church
First Sunday in Lent
February 22, 2026
Genesis 2:15-17, 3:1-7; Matthew 4:1-11

"Wilderness Grace"

I remember a worship service in another church when I announced the second hymn and noticed that "Come, Christians Join to Sing," had been typed, "Come, Christians Join to Sin." I doubt that any of us need to be called to sin. It comes quite naturally to us. We Presbyterians believe in original sin. We are nothing, if not original in our sin. But we are not alone.

I remember seeing a church sign that read, "If you're done with sin, come on in." As I got a little closer to the sign, I saw that someone had taped a hand-written note reading, "But if you're not quite through, call 272-0200."

The reality is that none of us are ever through with sin and temptation. Both are with us throughout our lives. It is only by the grace of God that we can overcome the temptations of life.

This Lenten season, I will be preaching on the grace of God using the hymn, "Amazing Grace" as a focus. The author, John Newton was an Anglican minister, who in his early life had participated in the slave trade. Newton surrendered his life to Christ and gave up the slave trade, eventually being ordained in the Church of England. On New Year's Day, 1773, Newton introduced "Amazing Grace" for his congregation to illustrate a sermon.

Thus, it seems appropriate that we celebrate this stirring hymn through Lent, 253 years after it became public. Our talented choir and other musicians will feature a different setting of "Amazing Grace" each Sunday in Lent. For these six weeks we will be surrounded, comforted and challenged by God's amazing grace.

Today we will see how Jesus' resistance of temptation is a clear sign of God's amazing grace. First, we need to recognize that temptation is itself not a sin, but it is the first step toward sinning. If we are ever to learn how not to sin, we must first learn how to resist temptation. The only one qualified to give us instructions on resisting temptation is the only one who successfully resisted all temptation - Jesus.

Scripture tells us that Jesus was like us in every way, which means that he was tempted to sin, just like us. By including the account of the wilderness temptations of Jesus, Matthew demonstrates three main points:

1. Our life's journey leads everyone into some wildernesses which cannot be avoided or escaped; and there are no exceptions to this truth.
2. Even in a severely weakened condition, Jesus' humanity was strengthened by resisting temptation.
3. Jesus is a proven guide who offers to lead us through the treacherous territory of temptation.

One of my favorite "Calvin and Hobbes" comic strips shows Calvin, a precocious six-year-old boy, speaking to his father: "Why can't I stay up late? You guys can! It's not fair!" Calvin's father responds, "The world isn't fair, Calvin." To which Calvin says, "I know. But why isn't it ever unfair in my favor?"

The unfairness of life is undeniable. People are afflicted with disease, economic setbacks, marital troubles, family estrangement and career difficulties without regard to their social standing or even their faith. Life involves times of agonizing, difficult, inner struggles which can make our lives seem desolate. When life sets us on the edge of a wilderness, we have two choices: to go through it or around it. However, we need to remember that choosing to avoid a wilderness generally means only delaying the journey through it.

Jesus must have realized that and wasted no time in entering the wilderness to confront its trials. There are some wildernesses that we simply must go through. For Jesus, the wilderness was a place that tested him both physically and spiritually. Here he was, a young man, barely thirty, alone in a vast treeless desert. Day after day he remained in this desolate place of blistering heat by day and bone-chilling cold by night. His only nourishment came from what he scavenged in that arid land, which was precious little.

This is the Jesus of history - a man with dust in his hair and dirt under his fingernails. This is a real human being, with a gaunt body and dry, cracked lips from the effects of hunger and thirst. Here is our Savior with aching eyes made bloodshot from sleepless nights of devilish torment, the likes of which we will never know. This was the episode which established his humanity just as his birth and baptism established his divinity. The temptation of Jesus in the wilderness revealed his humanness.

A great Christian author, C.S. Lewis, wrote these words in his book, *Mere Christianity*, about temptation: "A silly idea is current that good people do not know what temptation means. This is an obvious lie. Only those who try to resist temptation

know how strong it is. After all,...You find out the strength of a wind by trying to walk against it, not by lying down. A man who gives in to temptation after five minutes simply does not know what it would have been like an hour later. That is why bad people, in one sense, know very little about badness. They have lived a sheltered life by always giving in.

We never find out the strength of the evil impulse inside us until we try to fight it: and Christ, because He was the only man who never yielded to temptation, is also the only man who knows to the full what temptation means - the only complete realist."

The only way we could have this account today is because Jesus himself felt it important enough to relate this episode to his disciples, as a way of testifying that even for him, life was not an endless string of successes, easy miracles and a snap of the fingers to make all things right. Being the realist that he was, Jesus shared the details of his temptation and struggle with his disciples to show them the way through the wilderness.

The wilderness temptations establish the fact that Jesus is not a distant, remote, scrubbed-up, plastic image of a human being. The fact that Jesus is human through and through, is intended to encourage us in our wilderness wanderings. He is qualified to be our guide because he knows the way through the wilderness. Isn't that what we really want in a guide? Someone with experience?

Twenty-three years ago, Ellie and I traveled to Scotland with a group from our presbytery. What persuaded us to take this trip is the fact that the leader had been to Scotland at least a half dozen times and was thoroughly familiar with the places we would be visiting. We were confident in this trip because our guide knew the way.

The same thing can be said about Jesus. In Jesus Christ we have a guide who has more experience with wilderness temptation than we shall ever know. We can trust Jesus to guide us through whatever wilderness we must travel - the wilderness of disease, the wilderness of broken relationships, the wilderness of uncertainty, the wilderness of terrorism, the wilderness of spiritual hunger and thirst, the wilderness of grief, the wilderness of financial distress, the wilderness of addiction, the wilderness of death.....

Whatever wilderness you can name, Jesus has been there and will guide you through it. Some guides simply point the way to a destination, but Jesus goes with us through the wilderness. He is our companion on each step of the journey. It was by the grace of God that Jesus endured the wilderness for our sake. Surely, Jesus didn't need to prove his strength and courage to himself – after all Jesus is God. Jesus overcame

temptation for our benefit. Just as he would later endure the cross for our sake, he endured temptation for our sake.

That is the grace of God in action, showing us what is possible and assuring us that we will have a constant companion in all our temptations. Jesus knows the anxiety, distress and pain the wilderness causes. But he also knows the peace that comes from getting through the wilderness to the other side. Ultimately, that's what we seek - the peace that surpasses all understanding, all medical advice, all self-help book directions, all therapeutic instruction, all ten-step programs, all talk show advice, and all preachers' wisdom, which is usually precious little.

We want the peace that we can get only from Jesus Christ, who guides us through whatever wilderness we face and out the other side. I don't know about you, but I know that I am comforted by the knowledge that God in Jesus is not some distant, ethereal God who doesn't get dirty hands from going through what we go through. I want a God who knows what it is to face and how to get through a wilderness. I trust in Christ's wilderness grace. How about you?

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

The Charge: Wherever you go, God is sending you. Wherever you are, God will equip you. God will accomplish a purpose in your being where you are. Christ who dwells within you has something He wants to do through you where you are. Believe this and go in God's grace, love and power. Amen