

# Jesus in the Wild: Lessons on Calling for Life in the W...

## Pastor Paul Dinges

February 26, 2023

Sermon Audio file

When the Father calls you and I by our true name, there is always a threefold challenge that follows—a challenge to our identity, a challenge to our belovedness, and a challenge to our purpose. That challenge comes to us from a spiritual foe who is the embodiment of evil, an enemy whose singular goal is to get you lost in your own wilderness—lost about who you are (your identity), whose you are (your belovedness), and what you are for (your purpose).

Let's explore this story together, going into the wilderness, into the wild, with Jesus—to learn all we can for our own life and spiritual journeys.

### 1. What Is the Story of Jesus in the Wild All About?

There is perhaps no more unusual, or unusually placed story in the Gospels than the story of Jesus in the wilderness. We are led to Jesus's baptismal waters in Luke 3. Then – placed between the powerful declaration of belovedness from the Father in Jesus's baptism, and the launch of his Isaiah 61 ministry in Luke 4 – Jesus is tested, tempted, and challenged.

Luke 4:1–14 is an extended meditation on vocation, or what we typically name calling. The story of Jesus in the wild (“wild” is short for “wilderness”), is the story of Jesus facing his calling as the Son of God and the enemy's resistance of that calling. Each sermon in our series will focus on one lesson we can learn from the story of Jesus in the desert (what is called the *erēmos*, a word we'll consider in just a moment), but each message will have something to do with understanding our own callings in Christ Jesus. My desire is that you would move forward as a disciple toward hope: hope that recognizes that Jesus understands what it means to be in a place of vulnerability as the devil attacks, and that recognizes how Jesus stood firm, coming out of the wilderness season, “in the power of the Spirit” (Luke 4:14).

So, what is the “wild” in this passage? In Israel, the wild, or wilderness, is the barren lands—the hot and less populated, less fertile lands of ancient Israel. Author John Mark Comer puts it this way: “Desert here doesn't necessarily mean sand and heat. The Greek word is *eremos*, and it has a wide array of meanings. It can be translated desert, deserted place, desolate place, solitary place, lonely place, quiet place, wilderness. There are stories—lots of them—in all four Gospels about Jesus's relationship to the *eremos*, but this is that first story” (The Ruthless Elimination of Hurry [Colorado Springs: Waterbrook, 2019], 123–24).

### 2. What Happens in the Wild?

The eremos is where so much of life happens; lives are built on, or broken by, what happens in the quiet, solitary place. In the wild, Jesus must face his calling in its purest form, a calling he receives in the waters of baptism and a calling that he will live from, and into, for the rest of his life. So, too, we must face ourselves in the wild places of life—who we want to be, who we are called to be, who we thought we were, who we knew God to be, who we believe we are in God.

Jesus was tested in his calling, and that test came by way of three temptations from the devil. If you struggle with the idea that the Father allows us to be tested in the wildernesses of our own lives, then I humbly encourage you to read through the Old Testament and consider how many tests of faith, devotion, courage, and obedience were presented to those who loved God and were called according to his purpose (Rom. 8:28).

God allows us to be tested for our good. The enemy, however, tempts us for our destruction. The two experiences can look similar, but the purposes and outcomes of each are very, very different. God's testing is intended to build us up. The enemy's tempting is intended to tear us down. Dan Wilt says this: "There is a spiritual power of evil that both exists and has a purpose—to get you to either forfeit or extinguish the precious gift of life your Creator has given you" (p. 33).

In the wild, in the unpredictable and ever-changing, we are listening hard for the voice of God. The wild is a place of naked encounter with God and ourselves. The wild is the place we never want to go, but we choose to go there because the Spirit has led us—and we are not content to remain as we are. The wild is the right place for us to discover who we are, whose we are, and what we are for. The wild is necessary for us to mature into fullness of union with Christ. There is no other way.

In her book, *A Beautiful Disaster*, Marlena Graves writes this: "Eventually, God sends all who truly seek to know him into a spiritual wilderness. That's why St. John of the Cross calls this dark night, this desert of ours, a 'happy night.' The night is happy because, though it brings 'darkness to the spirit, it does so only to give it light in everything; ... although it humbles it and makes it miserable, it does so only to exalt it and to raise it up.' N.T. Wright notes, 'Wilderness has been used in Christian writing as an image for the dark side of the spiritual journey. Conversion, baptism, faith—a rich sense of the presence and love of God, of vocation and sonship - and then, the wilderness.'

"The spiritual desert wilderness is harsh, wild, and uncontrollable. Barely inhabitable and yet breathtakingly beautiful. Inarguably dangerous and possibly deadly but also transformational and even miraculous. Solitary and unfamiliar but full of grace and spiritual activity. The desert is a blessing disguised as a curse—a study in contrasts. While theophanies and divine epiphanies regularly occur there, so do unimaginable times of depression and despair.

“We hear many voices and sometimes have difficulty distinguishing among God’s, our own, the world’s, and that of the devil toying with us – meaning to eat us alive. The desert heightens our senses; paradoxically, we’re acutely aware of both God’s presence and His seeming absence. Truths once obscure, or mentally assented to, yet not experienced, suddenly stand out in sharp relief, while the superfluous recedes into the background. In the desert wilderness, miracles happen, temptations lure, and judgment occurs.” (Marlena Graves, *A Beautiful Disaster*, Baker Publishing Group, 2014, p.7.)

### 3. What Happens After the Wild?

Jesus’s identity, belovedness, and purpose was in question during the wild. It was not in question, ever again, after the desert experience. He will come out of the wild stronger, full of the Holy Spirit. But the test for Jesus, and the testing seasons in our own lives, comes with an unsettling possibility.

We can fail the test. And if we fail enough of those tests, or certain ones, we can become utterly lost in the wildlands of life. We may, literally, lose faith, lose heart. But through our tests, our trials, we are being trained to respond to God and to the devil just like Jesus did. So, the brighter possibility is that, like Jesus, we can leave our wildlands triumphant, faithful, true, and strong.

It is only in the wild that our faith can be proven to be genuine, not only to God, but to us as well (1 Peter 1:6). How empowering it is to come out of a trial realizing we succeeded in the way we had hoped to succeed! In the end, our journeys into the wildernesses of life are intended to make us like Jesus, to then bring life to others as he did later in Luke 4—proclaiming freedom to captives, good news to the poor, and that the kingdom of God is among us!

Jeremy Richards, in a sermon titled “Trusting God in the Wilderness,” posted on the Grant Park Church website on March 5, 2017, says this: “Jesus’ ability to be all that we cannot has opened the door of grace to us. We aren’t condemned by our failures but are empowered to keep venturing into the wilderness by the One who promises to journey with us. Our past failures don’t define us, but we’ve been given the same Spirit that descended upon Jesus, and that same Spirit drives us also out into the wilderness, time and time again.

“The wilderness isn’t a one-time thing. The wilderness is all around us, all the time. We are constantly called to venture into the wilderness, which is both a blessing and a curse. It’s the place of struggle. It always has been. The Israelites struggled for 40 years in the wilderness. Hagar was sure she and her son, Ishmael, would die in the wilderness. Elijah fled to the wilderness when he was being pursued by Ahab and Jezebel.

“These stories of God’s people in the wilderness are often accompanied by doubt, exhaustion, and hopelessness, and yet, in every case, God shows up in a profound way. God travels alongside the Israelites as a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night, eventually leading them into the promised land. [...]

“So, the wilderness is the place of hardship, but it’s also the place of God’s self-revelation. Richard Rohr often says that only two things change people: great love and great suffering.

“Often, in the wilderness, the two go hand-in-hand. In the midst of suffering, we find God’s love sustaining us. When we are in the wilderness we might meet the devil, but we will also meet angels, who will minister to us. Usually, these angels come in the form of friends, family, and the Church. When we are driven to the desert of doubt, we are gifted a more robust trust by the Holy Spirit who travels with us.

“Life is a series of wilderness experiences. Sometimes God leads us into these experiences, as the Spirit led Jesus, and as the pillar of cloud and fire led the Israelites. Other times we are thrown into the wilderness by the sin of others, as Elijah was forced into the wilderness because Ahab and Jezebel were seeking his life. Or Hagar, a slave, was exiled by Abraham and Sarah.

“The cause and severity of our wilderness experiences vary, between people and even within our own lives, but they all test our faith. More than that, they redefine what faith is. We come to realize that faith is not the absence of doubt, but trust [amid] doubt.

“The biblical scholar Pete Enns says, ‘A faith that promises to provide firm answers and relieve our doubt is a faith that will not hold up to the challenges and tragedies of life. Only deep trust can hold up.’

“Trust is, in the end, what it all comes down to. Not trust that God will save us from the wilderness – Jesus’ ministry is in many ways one long wilderness experience – but trust that God is with us in the wilderness.”

Have you experienced the wild in recent weeks? If so, how has the unpredictability of your circumstances, the lack of control you may have felt, revealed where your faith truly is? If you’re in the wild of your life right now, the unpredictable, the unknown, know that the Lord is with you in it. You went in with a blessing, even led by the Spirit—and you’re going to come out strong! Just trust in God and keep the faith.