

# Jesus in the Wild: Identity • Belovedness • Purpose

## Pastor Paul Dinges

March 5, 2023

Sermon Audio file

Jesus's experience in the wild in Luke 4 is different from suffering or even just temptation. Many of us were taught to combine the two ideas of the wilderness and suffering, and though testing from all sides happens in all kinds of trials, the wild Jesus enters is a field of battle onto which he has been guided by the Spirit of God.

That puts the wild in a different light. If the Spirit sends us there, then the Spirit is with us in it. Therefore, the wild – the place of testing – can happen to us, or we and the Spirit can happen to it. Jesus goes in to the wild isolated (alone) and empty (fasting) by choice to face down the sinister voice that is about to tell him that everything God has said is untrue—and that there is a better, easier way.

The tempter begins to turn the selfless nature of Jesus's calling toward a vision of a new kind of self-satisfying, self-fulfilling, self-focused calling that Jesus could embrace if he so chooses. Do you know that tempting voice and the distorted version of life purpose it offers? I know it well. The wild is a dangerous place to be for making big decisions, especially when you're weak and hungry. Nonetheless, into the wilderness of testing, armed with only the spiritual business card his Father had affirmed at his baptism, Jesus went.

Here is the opening question for your consideration: What is your identity as a child of God? In search of an answer, let's look back to the story of Jesus's baptism in Luke 3, right before the wilderness narrative: "When all the people were being baptized, Jesus was baptized too. And as he was praying, heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven: 'You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased'" (21-22)

What happened in Jesus's baptism? His calling was made clear by the Father. Jesus knows who he is. The Lord says, "You are my Son." Thus, Jesus's core identity and vocation is clear, to live as a Son in perfect covenant communion with his Father. Jesus knows whose he is. Next, Jesus hears this: "Whom I love." Here, Jesus receives a word of affection and belovedness that will feed him the rest of his life. Jesus knows why he is and what he must do that flows from it. God goes on to say: "With you I am well pleased." With these words, Jesus receives an affirmation of his value before he has even begun his ministry and done one miracle. He will not draw his sense of purpose from anything other than the Father's love.

His vocation ... his calling ... his identity ... his essential nature, is blessed and secured by the Father. In the same manner, Father God calls you! Now, don't roll or avert your eyes because I'm talking to you! That's right – you as Son ... you as Daughter are called by God! In short, that's your business card or calling card (pun intended). Your calling, my calling, is to be someone, named by the Father, who then does something in

the world. That is the essence of our true calling. It is the powerful combination of a deep awareness of our identity, our belovedness, and our purpose.

Pursuing purpose without knowledge of our identity and belovedness is a recipe for disaster. Calling is rooted in self-awareness before God. Jesus clearly understood his identity and belovedness in God and had a strong sense of self-awareness before God. Thus, Jesus will not fail! If he can face the tempter's questions down now as he goes into the wild, and can answer them solidly for his own heart, he can walk the hard road ahead of him. And so can we!

This leads to the next questions for your consideration: What is your belovedness as a child of God? Asked in another way: Do you know – really, deeply know – you are loved by God? And what are you doing to nurture that experience of the Father's divine care for you?

Jesus went into the wilderness, not with his belly full of food, but with his heart full of the Holy Spirit. He is prepared to go without food, because he is drawing from a source that satisfies his spiritual needs more than his bodily cravings. Fasting can have that effect on us. Jesus is experiencing fullness in the Holy Spirit even while his stomach is empty. Fullness: That's a word we can hold on to.

You know that feeling you have when you've just had a good meal and you are completely satisfied with no need to further satisfy your palate or your hunger? That is one form of fullness. Do you know that other feeling when you've just been with those you love, and you exchanged the gifts of care, affection, and support? That's another form of fullness. Jesus experiences fullness when he leaves the Jordan of his baptism and heads toward the wilderness, led by the Spirit. Food may set his endorphins in motion, but Jesus is resisting the satisfaction of food to make his spirit attentive to a different kind of sustenance.

Jesus wants to be full of something other than food and is full of something other than food. I believe he is full of love—the Father's satisfying, satiating, spiritual-hunger-quenching love. That is what Jesus's baptism was all about. That's why Jesus spends his entire ministry unmoved by the fickle opinions of the crowd. He has learned to feed his soul on God's presence and love, rather than on human affirmation and attention. That learned "holy indifference," as Ignatius of Loyola called it, enabled him to be indifferent to anything other than the Father's will.

In John 4:32 Jesus says to his inquisitive disciples, "I have food to eat that you know nothing about." When they press him to understand where he got his meal, Jesus explains in verse 34: "My food," said Jesus, "is to do the will of him who sent me and to finish his work." Jesus knows where the soul's food is—and it's not in the field or at the market.

Now this important question for you to ponder in the next few hours, days, and weeks ahead: What is your purpose as a child of God? Every follower of Jesus has one mission, one purpose—to be like Jesus in this world. There is no other way to be God’s child.

In 1 John 4:15–19 we read these profound words: “If anyone acknowledges that Jesus is the Son of God, God lives in them and they in God. And so, we know and rely on the love God has for us. God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in them. This is how love is made complete among us so that we will have confidence on the day of judgment: In this world we are like Jesus. There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love. We love because [God] first loved us.”

Ultimately, living in belovedness is fulfilling our calling in God. It’s never more complicated than that – no matter how much we try to complicate it. And from that core calling, we move into the world with the mission of Christ overwhelming our hearts.

When your name and the words “Beloved Son” or “Beloved Daughter” below it, is all you have on your business card, then you are full of the Holy Spirit and ready to do anything that pleases the Father. God didn’t call you or me to put a specific ministry on our spiritual business card, or to regard any particular platform as essential to our fulfillment or well-being. All God wants is our name on that card, so He can say, “Name, I need you here now,” or “Name, I need you to do this for me,” and we quickly and joyfully obey.

Whether we have a platform or not, we remain God’s beloved child. That is our purpose. Knowing who we are as a beloved child of God is the very headwaters of the river of calling—everything flows from there.

Emily grew up as an overachiever in an affluent community. Her parents gave her high expectations for success, but no personal faith. But then, at the age of 19, she experienced chronic health problems, and her life became unglued. Talking to a friend of hers who had always had to struggle academically, Emily asked her how she coped with disappointed expectations. Her friend replied that she knew she was a child of God and that was all that mattered. She was loved.

Emily found that response different from anything she had heard before. It set her on a journey of spiritual discovery that ultimately led to her becoming a Christian and later being ordained as a Presbyterian minister. She is now a chaplain at a children’s hospital.

Emily’s friend had no idea that her casual comment about her relationship to God would have such an

impact on the life of another. But that's how Christian witness works. Someone is always watching how we live our lives. What they see can make a huge difference. And what Emily saw in her friend was someone who was certain and assured in the wonderful truth that she was loved ... that she was a beloved child of God! And that's all that mattered.

Jesus was full of the presence of God - the breath of God - going into the wild. We must be as well. Our vocation, our calling, is our sonship and daughterhood—not the tasks we do or the talents we have. We must get this right. Jesus did; the biggest questions of calling in his heart had already been answered, and they had nothing to do with how impressive his résumé looked, or didn't look, at the time. Rather, it had everything to do with Jesus knowing his identity, his belovedness, and his purpose in God his Father.

How about you? Do you truly know, honor, and celebrate your identity, belovedness, and purpose in God your Father? Your answer to and struggle with this question all comes down to this: LOVE. (Am I right, Joe?) For example: Have you ever tried to fill yourself full of a love that was lesser than the love of God? If so, what would it mean for you to welcome the Holy Spirit to speak into that love to help it find its proper place in the context of the Father's love for you and for the entire world?

Thank you, Lord, for your unconditional, unchanging, unparalleled love for us and for Jesus' experience in the wild, that teaches us important lessons about our identity, belovedness, and purpose in you. Amen and amen!