

False Promises
The First Sunday of Lent
Luke 4:1-13
Sunday, March 6, 2022

By Rev. Dr. Chris Keating

It isn't that Jesus is saying no to the devil, but rather yes to God—calling us to ground our lives within the promises of the one who rejected the powers of the world

Is it me, or does it feel exceptionally cruel that Girl Scout Cookies are being delivered just as Lent is beginning? At the very moment so many people are vowing to sacrifice something – dessert, treats, chocolate, coffee – caseloads of Thin Mints have somehow managed to make their way through the otherwise undependable supply chain?

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What are you giving up for Lent? The practice of giving up comes from Jesus' 40 days of fasting and temptation in the wilderness. Our Lenten journeys begin each year by revisiting this story of Jesus' retreat into the wilderness. The Spirit of God leads Jesus into this place of rugged isolation, a place defined by what Belden Lane has called "fierce landscapes." Scripturally

speaking, the wilderness is always a time of both testing and growth. It is in the wilderness that Israel wanders—but it is also a place where they are led by God, accompanied by the cloud and mystery of God’s presence. In the New Testament, John goes into the wilderness to prepare for the coming of the kingdom of God. Jesus, too, retreats into the wilderness after being baptized – it is a place where he wrestles with temptations, gives up food in fasting, and offers himself in prayer. The wilderness life is harsh and difficult. Lane, who as a Presbyterian taught theology at Saint Louis University for many years, suggests that it is only in those fierce landscapes that intimacy with God is truly achieved. “God’s invitation to the spiritual life is a call to the high-risk venture of being loved more fiercely than we ever might have dreamed,” writes Lane, who has spent a lifetime hiking the canyons and wilderness places of the world. ¹

There is an inseparable connection between geography and spirituality. This connection is often neglected, especially in North American culture where we are often focused on getting from place to place as quickly as possible. But for centuries, Lane argues, Christians sought solace in the fierce and untamed wildernesses of deserted places – much like Jesus, whom Luke tells us was “led by the Spirit in the wilderness, where for forty days he was tempted by the devil.”

We misread Jesus’ journey into the wilderness if we see it only as “giving up” or saying “No” to things we should probably not be eating anyway. Instead, Jesus models for us another Lenten practice: we grow by how we say yes.

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It is one thing to give up treats and extras. It is another thing to give ourselves to the work of God—to give of ourselves, to share what we have, to walk into the wilderness and defy the false promises of the one who is always tempting us to be more, to do more, to have more.

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There are, write Charles Campbell, powers of the world that "hold people captive; they are the institutions and systems, along with driving spirit within them, that promise people life but in fact lead people along the way of death."³ These powers are seductive in drawing us in with fake promises. And, like every fake promise, they lead us into the wildernesses of despair and

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