

First Presbyterian Church of Plymouth, Michigan

Life Together – In the Desert

Sunday, September 27, 2020

Rev. Mark Hovermale

Rev. Mark Hovermale – Welcome, Announcement

Welcome to worship on September 27th, 2020. We are so glad you're joining us online. A special thank you to Susan Underhill for working the magic to make this all come alive for us, and Emily for being a liturgist, and Geff Phillips for providing worship music for us today.

We have just one announcement, but it's a big one! Next Sunday, October 4th, is World Communion Sunday, and we don't just have one way for you to worship with us, we have two ways! The first is like you are doing now. You can go online next week to fpcp.net and watch the worship video for our service online, as you have been doing. There is a second way. At 10:00 a.m., October 4th, next Sunday, you can come to the church parking lot for our first ever parking lot worship service. We will be worshipping via a radio broadcast, yeah, a radio broadcast! Now you have to be in your cars and here in the parking lot to hear the radio broadcast, but Emily is going to be preaching live. Bekah Brudi (our former Upper Room music leader) will be leading live worship music. We will be social distancing, hanging out and hearing the worship service through your radio, but seeing people live. Pretty interesting and pretty cool. We would love for you to check it out. If you are interested, you have to register your vehicle ahead of time, either online or by calling the church at 734-453-6464, Ext. 113. Either way, no matter which one you decide upon, we hope you join us next Sunday, World Communion Sunday, for worship.

Rev. Emily Campbell – Opening Prayer

Would you all please pray with me. Gracious God, it is with joy that we approach you today. We praise you, gracious God, for this day of life. We praise you for the opportunity to join in worship, even in these challenging times when everything in life changes. We thank you, dear God, for always remaining the same. We praise you today for your constant presence and your continuous love and grace. In our experiences of both joy and sadness, you are present, offering us both strength and peace. Lord, we ask that you would forgive us for the times when we forget to recognize your holy presence in our lives, forgive us for the times when we fail to rely on your strength. Deepen our faith, we pray, throughout this pandemic, so we may grow in our knowledge and in our love for you. Lead us now more deeply into worship. This we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

Rev. Mark Hovermale – Introduction to the Sermon Theme

We are continuing our sermon series of "Life Together," and today we're looking at "In the Desert." We are looking at how we do life together. We talked the first week about, hey, we are not together, but we are. Last week's theme was "In the Storms of Life," and how we can rely on God. This week we are looking at life together through the lens of *in the desert*. Now being in the desert is not necessarily like being in the storm. You see a storm is intense, it kind of comes out of nowhere, bringing feelings like panic or fight or flight, and it can be overwhelming. The desert is not quite the same. You see, the desert is just kind of--there you are walking along, and you find yourself in the desert. You are going

about life and there is no real change in scenery. There are no really intense feelings unless you run across a rattlesnake in the desert--that would be intense! But slowly, methodically, being in the desert can wear you down. Sometimes the most mundane things like food and water seem so important just to survive in the desert. I am talking about—well, we're not moving the church to Arizona. So what am I talking about? Well, given the description I just gave you of walking through a physical desert, I have one question for you. Can you relate? Can you relate in terms of your life right now? Let me ask: are you tired? Are you exhausted? Is life just kind of missing that spark, that joy? With everything happening in 2020, is the season you are in right now seemingly never-ending? If so, or you know someone who is, you may want to dial in for a few minutes of this service. We are going to look at two stories of two people or one group of people and one person who were in the desert physically in the Bible. We're going to compare the responses to their times in the desert and see what we can learn, because here's one fact I know: If you're not in the desert now, or you haven't been, you surely will be at one point in your life.

Rev. Emily Campbell – Scripture Reading

Joshua 5:6 (New Revised Standard Version)

⁶For the Israelites traveled forty years in the wilderness, until all the nation, the warriors who came out of Egypt, perished, not having listened to the voice of the LORD. To them the LORD swore that he would not let them see the land that he had sworn to their ancestors to give us, a land flowing with milk and honey.

Matthew 4:1-11 (New Revised Standard Version)

Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. ²He fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished. ³The tempter came and said to him, “If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread.” ⁴But he answered, “It is written,

‘One does not live by bread alone,
but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.’”

⁵Then the devil took him to the holy city and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, ⁶saying to him, “If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down; for it is written,

‘He will command his angels concerning you,’
and ‘On their hands they will bear you up,
so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.’”

⁷Jesus said to him, “Again it is written, ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’”

⁸Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor; ⁹and he said to him, “All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me.” ¹⁰Jesus said to him, “Away with you, Satan! for it is written,

‘Worship the Lord your God,
and serve only him.’”

¹¹Then the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him.

Rev. Mark Hovermale — Sermon

Well, again, our sermon today is about doing life together in the desert. Here is our first example of a group of people in the desert, in the Bible. In Joshua 5, verse 6, the Israelites were in the wilderness for 40 years, after they left Egypt, until the military-aged men had passed away. They disobeyed God, so they were punished by God and had to travel and wander the desert for 40 years. Their entire generation had to die off. Theologians have said, between 30 and 40 years, they were in the desert. Now the number of men was about 600,000. That is a lot of people wandering in the desert, but it was more than that. When you count the women and children, a lot of theologians think about two million people were wandering the desert. That is a lot of people!

A couple of really important takeaways from the Israelites wandering the desert for all that time: in Numbers, chapter 11, we learn they started to complain about the hardships. They started talking to God; they started complaining about how hard their life was. Now remember this, they were wandering the desert because of *their* disobedience, not God disappearing on them. But they were complaining and complaining and complaining. Then they got hungry. They had some food, but they did not like the food they had. So, literally, it says, again in Numbers 11:4, the Israelites started wailing! They were wailing, all right, like a little kid. They were complaining. They started to say how much better it was when they were in Egypt. You remember, they were slaves in bondage when they were in Egypt! But, oh, they were complaining to God that their food was not five star; all this while they were wandering the desert because of their disobedience!

God was not happy, but he responded by giving them manna, or bread, in the morning, and quail, which was meat, in the evening. Now imagine the quail—literally about a million or so of them, we think, came in on a wind. It was amazing. They were scattered all across the ground by God. So at this point, did the Israelites say, “We messed up! Okay, God has been faithful to us, now we’re going to respond and be positive and really come through in the desert.” No they did not! They continued to rebel against God, again and again. Even their leader, Moses, began saying it was so much better in Egypt!

Why do I tell you the story about the Israelites wandering the desert for 38 - 40 years? Here is one key insight you may take away. It is a little long, but I really want you to dial into this. The Israelites consistently responded to their time in the desert by complaining and blaming and not trusting God. They consistently complained and blamed God and did not trust him or act on their faith in the desert!

Now let us compare that to another character, a pretty important one in the Bible, and how he handled His time in the desert. So example two of a kind of a major character is Jesus. In the scripture passage that Emily read, you have this classically well-known story of the temptation of Jesus. It is a well-known story from the book of Matthew. The devil tempts Jesus while he is in the desert. Scholars believe that this happened west of Jericho and north of the Dead Sea. As far as the idea of *tempting* Jesus, I learned that the Greek verb that is translated ‘tempted’ can also be rendered ‘tested.’ Catch that? ‘Tempted’ in the original language can also be rendered ‘tested.’

Jesus is preparing by fasting 40 days and 40 nights. In many cases, fasting is just avoiding food for a long period of time. It kind of connects to the Old Testament, to the experiences of Moses and Elijah, but did you catch 40 days and 40 nights? In our first story, the Israelites wandered the desert approximately 40 years. Kind of a funny connection there.

Jesus comes up to the first temptation, or test, with the devil. It is reported in the Bible that he is hungry. Now, here is the “theological” reason why Jesus was hungry: he had not eaten in 40 days, and if you don't eat in 40 days... you will be hungry, too! But there is a serious key insight to this. Many times, when we enter the desert, we are not always at our best, so to speak. Jesus was there spiritually, but He was exhausted physically. We are usually a bit worn down when we enter the desert because we can't prepare for it.

I have done a lot of races, endurance races. When I train for a marathon, it is a six-month training program. You get out to about 20 miles before you stop training intensely. In the last three weeks, you taper down or go very few miles a week. This is not true when you are entering the life in the desert because you don't know when it's going to come, and you usually don't enter rested. You usually enter exhausted.

Now in the first test or temptation for Jesus, the devil says to Jesus, “Tell these stones to become bread.” Now let us think about this—this is pretty reasonable. We know Jesus could do it, as he turned water into wine. Jesus is extremely hungry. He has not eaten in 40 days. This is very tempting, and the Devil is basically saying, “Jesus, you're the son of God, do whatever you want. You don't need anyone or anything.” Jesus responds with scripture: “Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.” Our key insight is pretty obvious. From Jesus' time the desert, for his first test, Jesus responds to the test with scripture. Now think about this: Jesus is the son of God. If anyone could have just responded to this, off the cuff, with his best idea, it is the son of God. But He comes back to scripture to respond to his test.

This kind of convicts me. When I face testing, I do not respond with scripture first, and yet Jesus, Son of God, did! He said a few things here: food ain't everything. That is the first thing, food isn't everything! He said, secondly, “We are dependent on God, the Father, for our *spiritual* food.” This connects back to the manna for the Israelites in the first story, because God the Father gave them bread and God the Father gives us spiritual food.

Now the second temptation for Jesus—it is getting more heated. The devil takes him to a high spot. Now just so you know, I would be out right there, because I am not a high-place guy. I get nervous on roller coasters! Jesus, I'm sure, had no problem with that and so he was in the high place and the devil says, “Hey, throw yourself down. God will surely save you.” Imagine this, the devil misquotes and misinterprets scripture and twists a passage of the Bible to try to trick Jesus. He is a Son of God, all right. No one knew the Bible better than Jesus, and the devil is trying to trick him by misquoting scripture! Anyway, Jesus responds: “It is also written, do not put the Lord your God to the test.”

What is the key insight from this second test? Jesus knows what he believes, and he applies it in the time in the desert. *Jesus knows what he believes, and he applies it in the desert fight!*

For us, do we believe in faith? And the second thing is, do we apply it? Just like Reverend Emily said last week, “In the storms do we trust God, or do we just give lip service?”

Now the third temptation or test of Jesus—this is a doozy! The devil takes him up to a high mountain and shows him all the kingdoms and the riches and says, “Just worship me and you can have it all. Jesus, in his response, he first tells the devil—this is my

interpretation, he tells him to get lost! Then he says this from scripture, “Worship the Lord your God and serve him only.”

So what is the key insight? I can go a lot of ways with this, but here is what I gather, doing what is right will usually cost you something. *Doing what is right will usually cost you something.* Jesus could have had it all; he was 100% God, 100% man. He wanted the kingdoms, we all would want the riches. All he needs to do is worship the devil for a little bit, but he said “No!”

You might be in a situation when you are faced with a decision where there's a right decision and there is a wrong decision, but you will profit financially, emotionally, and physically from the wrong decision. What will you do? Will you pay the cost and do what is right, because you are going to face that, I'm going to face that, many times throughout the week, month, and year and in our lifetimes. Doing what is right will usually cost you something, but Jesus paid the price.

Quite a difference between the Israelites and Jesus. Two groups that handle critical times completely differently. I will let you come up with your own conclusions about the comparison and contrast. However, I am going to leave you with two things. Here is a question: who are you most like when you are in the desert of life? *Who are you most like when you are in the desert of life?* Now you are not going to be exactly like Jesus, because we can't be Jesus. You are probably not going to be exactly like the Israelites in the desert, hopefully, but you're probably going to be leaning one way or the other. So ask yourself—which one do I lean towards? Here is the fact: In both examples—Jesus and the Israelites—did you notice, *did you notice* the one constant? God! God was faithful in both situations. God has always been faithful, He is faithful, and God will always be faithful. Amen. And thanks be to God.

Rev. Emily Campbell — Prayer

Gracious and loving God, we thank you for the reminder that we have received this morning that in our every desert experience you are there, faithful and true, determined and dependable, committed to sustaining us in this life and getting us home safely. We thank you, dear God, that in every temptation, challenge, hardship, and loss, your power and love remain constant and consistent. We pray today for anyone who struggles to find you in the midst of their pain, for anyone who feels truly alone during this pandemic. We pray that your spirit would bring comfort, encouragement, and hope. We pray as well today for those who are sick and for those who care for the sick. Lord, bring healing and strength, we pray. We pray, as well, for those who teach and for those who learn. We pray for wisdom, grit and peace. Lift anxious thoughts and worries from all of our hearts, dear God, we pray. Help us to trust you through every experience of life. May we find our resolve to move forward in faith and in hope, in the grace you offer to us each hour. Lord, you know the needs of our lives and the needs of this world better than we understand them ourselves. Please hear us now as we pray for healing and peace within our nation and within our world. May we be open to praying according to your Spirit's prompting.

This we ask in the strong name of Jesus Christ, your son, who has taught us when we pray to say together: Our father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy Kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us. Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil, for thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, now and forever. Amen.

Rev. Mark Hovermale — Benediction

As you go through the deserts of life, may you apply what you believe to your life.

May the blessing of God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit be on you and yours, today and forever more. Amen.