



# Lakeside Sermons

Lakeside Baptist Church • Rocky Mount, North Carolina  
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FEBRUARY 21, 2021  
THE FIRST SUNDAY IN LENT  
*PRAYING WITH OUR EYES*

## Seeing God in the Wilderness Matthew 4:1-11; Ephesians 1:3-6, 15-19

Three men were talking and discussing the proper position and attitude for prayer. One said, “You should be on your knees with your head bowed in reverence to the Almighty.”

The second man spoke up and said, “Remember that you were created in God’s image. The position in which to pray is standing up looking into the heavens into the face of God and talk to Him as a child to his father.”

The third man spoke up and said, “I know nothing about those positions, but the finest praying I ever did was upside down in a well!”<sup>1</sup>

I have never been upside down in a well, but I can imagine that some very fine praying would be done in such a position—just like the praying you and I have done in our own tight spots. Prayer is one of those topics on which much ink has been spilt and many a sermon has been preached. Overall, I suppose, we basically think of prayer as an opportunity to talk with God, to express gratitude, but mainly to ask God for help with whatever is wrong with us or the world—even if it is trying to get out of a well.

What is prayer? And how should we pray? In a tight spot, the answer is pretty clear, but at other times we have to put forth some effort and pay attention to what is going on in our lives, in the life of someone else, or in the world at large. We have to notice something in order to feel the need to pray about it and to discern what to pray about it.

When I was in seminary doing clinical work as a hospital chaplain, we were told that when we entered a patient’s room we should take notice. Certainly we needed to pay attention to the patient and find out his or her name and medical needs. We also needed to notice whether or not there were flowers or cards or other people present, all indicative of support or a lack thereof. A person alone in their illness might have different needs than

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<sup>1</sup>Saunders Guerrant, “Prayer Positions,” *The Preacher Joke Book*, Loyal Jones, ed. (Little Rock: August House, Inc., 1989), 57.

someone with family and friends caring for them. By paying attention we picked up clues about a patient and his or her deeper needs. Those clues led us to prayer and ministry.

I believe God wants us to pay attention, not only to this wonderful and complex world, but also to God. As most of us have discovered, God often shows up differently in different places. In his letter to the believers in Ephesus, Paul prayed for his friends that God would give them a spirit of wisdom and revelation to the end that the eyes of their hearts would be enlightened and they would know the hope to which God was calling them. In other words, Paul prayed that God would enable his friends, not only to see more clearly, but to understand what they were seeing.

During this season of Lent, we offer that same prayer for ourselves. We want to learn to see God in our lives and to understand what it is that God is doing. So we will discover how to pray with our eyes. I have often thought that if we could be completely aware and attuned to God, we would be amazed to discover what is happening all around us, most often unseen. Maybe we will learn to do just that!

On this first Sunday of Lent, as we begin learning to pray with our eyes, we look at the wilderness experience of Jesus. We often think of that time, just after his baptism, as his temptation in the wilderness, but that is not all that happened in that deserted place. Let's see what we discover when we look closely and carefully. Listen to Matthew's account of what took place:

Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. He fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished. The tempter came and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread." But he answered, "It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.'"

Then the devil took him to the holy city and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying 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.'" Jesus said to him, "Again it is written, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'"

Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor; and he said to him, “All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me.” Jesus said to him, “Away with you, Satan! for it is written, ‘Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.’” Then the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him.  
Matthew 4:1-11

What do you see in this wilderness, this deserted place? I am certain that each one of us has a different image of what Jesus looked like, how the Tempter appeared, and what that wild place itself was like. If each of us were able to paint a picture of this scene, they would all be different, but not necessarily incorrect.

A friend from long ago, a teaching fellow in systematic theology classes and fellow laborer on the grounds crew at seminary, popped back into my life a few weeks ago. Dr. Carson Brisson, who for many years has taught at Union Theological Seminary in Richmond and Charlotte, offered a meditation for Silverside Baptist Church in Wilmington, Delaware where a mutual friend, Dr. David Farmer (also a teaching fellow when I was in seminary) is pastor. I made a point of watching the worship video which was a reflection on this story of Jesus as captured in a painting by Russian artist Ivan Nikolaevich Kramskoi. Carson’s insights and Kramskoi’s skill fired my interests because I immediately realized that both the artist and the professor were praying with their eyes as they looked at Jesus in the wilderness.<sup>2</sup>

The conversations between Jesus and the Tempter which we just heard are not simply clever banter. They quote scripture back and forth to make their points, reminding us of a common theme in the gospels which is that even the demons, the princes of darkness, those who are evil, know and quote scripture. Moreover, they see Jesus and understand who he is—often before the faithful do. The story reminds us that it is rather easy to quote scripture, but much more important to know the One who inspired the words. The Tempter was looking for Jesus. Otherwise, why bother with this lonely pilgrim out in the desert? The Tempter knew Jesus was the Son of God. One reason for the story is so that we might find Jesus, too.

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<sup>2</sup>Dr. E. Carson Brisson, “A Meditation on Jesus in the Wilderness,” *Silverside Sunday Morning Online* (January 17, 2021; available online at: <https://silverside.today/2021/01/17/silverside-sunday-morning-online-january-17-2021-dr-e-carson-brisson-guest-preacher/>).

Kramskoi apparently worked on his painting of Christ in the wilderness for many years. In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, two approaches to art competed with one another. European intellectuals thought that “history painting” was the pinnacle of art. We have all seen grand paintings of historical events or mythological scenes. The Impressionists in Paris were exploring light, color, and landscape, but Kramskoi chose his own path. By and large he painted portraits, but his portraits included color and detail that revealed his subjects character and mood. This painting is perhaps his finest example of that skill.<sup>3</sup>

Look at Kramskoi’s painting of Jesus in the wilderness. Let’s allow this painting to open us to what Jesus sees and thinks and feels. The first thing you notice is Jesus’ face. The look on his face defines his body. He doesn’t look particularly tired or distressed, but he is intent and focused, his gaze fixed on some spot on the ground or, perhaps, . . . on eternity. What do you think is on through Jesus’ mind?

Jesus is perched on a “throne of rocks.” The King of kings and Lord of lords” is literally seated on the bedrock of creation. Carson calls his posture an “oblique dignity.” Others have referred to it as “hidden majesty.” There is nothing here that we would ordinarily define as “regal” - no golden chair, no elegant robes, no bejeweled crown. Yet, there is something about Jesus that bespeaks authority that no earthly ruler could ever possess. Jesus is truly majestic without having to put it on parade.

Notice, too, Jesus’ hands. Clapsed in front of him, resting between his knees, they are intertwined, even tightly. Carson points out that they hold no weapon or staff or sword or even bread-things that would be very helpful in the wilderness. Instead, they are empty . . . except for prayer. We know what those hands will do when answering the prayers of other people with healing and blessing. For now, they are clasped in a way that suggests energy about to spring forth.

There is a detail here that can easily be overlooked: Jesus is barefoot. No sandal is anywhere to be seen—not a wise choice in the Judean wilderness. Kramskoi emphasizes the sharp, jagged rocks that carpet the ground. Jerusalem is about fifteen and a half miles uphill off Jesus’ left shoulder. That is where he is headed, but if he chooses to make that

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<sup>3</sup>Hovak Najarian, “Commentary on ‘Christ in the Desert, Oil on Canvas, 1872, Ivan Nikolaevich Kramskoi, 1837-1887,’” *Hear What the Spirit Is Saying: Sunday Morning at St. Hugh's in Idyllwild, California* (March 3, 2014); available online at: <https://smecsundaymorningforum.org/2014/03/03/christ-in-the-desert-art-for-a-lent-1/>

journey—as we know he will—he will have a difficult go of it, to say the least. He seems ill-equipped, barefoot and with no provisions, to make any trek in the inhospitable wild place he finds himself.

The foreground of the painting is pastel, but it portrays a cold severity to the desert in reality and in the artist's eye. Just over his shoulder, dawn is happening, but below the horizon, light and darkness are mingled. The darkness is not quite finished but its work is done. It has not won because the light is filtering in, breaking it apart, weakening its stronghold. One wonders why Jesus is not looking toward the light. Any one of us in the desert after a long night would look to the east in anticipation of the dawn. Why does Jesus face the darkness instead? Is it a hint that he will always face the darkness head on and with unflinching resolve?

Where is the Tempter? Has he come and gone, leaving Jesus hungry and exhausted? Has he not yet come and Jesus is steeling himself against the onslaught of the spirit he knows is on its way? Has he come once or twice and is about to return the third time? What do you see?

And where are the angels who ministered to him? Have they not yet come? Or have they fed their Lord and departed, leaving him refreshed but heavy with thoughts of what now lies ahead?

Kramskoi was criticized for this painting because his contemporaries insisted that no one knew what Jesus actually looked like. No portraits or likenesses were preserved; therefore, an artist could not, dare not, paint a portrait of the Lord. Kramskoi agreed with them saying, "You are correct, but we also do not recognize Jesus today when he appears right in front of us—in the needs of another person."<sup>4</sup>

What do you see in this painting? What do you see when you think about Jesus in the wilderness? Where do you find God in this place? What you see is your prayer. What you pray is your understanding of God.

This past year has been a wilderness, hasn't it? The other night, comedian Jimmy Kimmell said, "The whole year has been Lent! What more can we give up?" What has this past year been like for you? How would you describe the wilderness you have been in the past twelve months? Rocky?

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<sup>4</sup>Brisson.

Dark? Uncertain? Inconvenient? Frightening? Exhausting? Tempting? Lonely? Hopeful? Revealing? Enlightening?

How do you think Jesus might describe this pandemic if he were among us today? Where would he go today for a wilderness experience to prepare for his ministry? Where have you seen God in this wilderness experience? Where have you seen the Tempter?

I heard of one Tempter. A church in a largely rural county returned to in-person worship last fall. The week before, the pastor sent out an email on behalf of the Deacons explaining the protocols that would have to be followed in order to be safe and healthy. Everyone would wear a mask and maintain a safe distance from one another. There would be no singing. There would be no handshakes or hugs. On that first Sunday back, one parishioner responded to the pastor's email (which went to everyone in the congregation) saying, "We are in God's house and in God's house we pray, we sing, we hold each other's hand and console each other through difficulties. Please take off those masks, sing with our choir, and pray. Remember trust in God. In God's house there is nothing to fear." I am not even certain that person was in attendance that day. I do, however, hear echos of Jesus saying, "Do not put the Lord your God to the test."

As I think about our Lenten journey just beginning and this story of Jesus' time in the wilderness, I remember one of his other responses to the Tempter's effort to coax him into magically changing stones into bread. Jesus said, "One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God." I also remember that the story tells us angels came and waited on Jesus, providing nourishment and care, we would assume. For all of the things we have missed this past year, God has nevertheless provided for us and continues to do so. God always ministers to us and through us.

When you think about Jesus in the wilderness, when you read the story in scripture, when you look at this painting, where do you see yourself in it? What would you be doing? What would you be thinking? What would you be praying?

Kramskoi heard and read this story of Jesus in the wilderness many times in his life, I am certain. He was not there in the Judean desert. In fact, he never visited the Holy Land. But he looked and he saw because he prayed with his eyes. He attempted to find God in his life so he prayed with his eyes.

That prayer became this beautiful and revealing painting of Jesus in the wilderness, one which now invites us to pray with our eyes.

As we begin the journey from the desert to Jerusalem, the rocky, challenging, sometimes painful, always hopeful journey, let us remember that as Jesus prepared to make his journey, he sat and reflected, hands clasped holding nothing but prayer. Do not forget that just over his shoulder—and ours—the dawn is breaking and the darkness is done. God, through angels we may or may not see, ministers to us. Praying with our eyes helps us to see Jesus in the needs of the person right in front of us. Praying with our eyes enables us to see God's love painted on the canvas of our lives.

February 21, 2021

## Prayer of Thanksgiving and Intercession

When we are paying attention, we are keenly aware of the working of your power around and within us, O God, and in these anxious and uncertain days, we have come to rely even more on your power to sustain and guide us. We know that when the news is good and our faith is strong, it is easier for us to recognize the evidence that you are near. It is easier to be open to you when answers come and your abundant gifts are apparent. But we know all too well that life sometimes takes us through wilderness places, into territory that seems threatening and unfamiliar. Illness or economic insecurity, tensions in relationships and conflicts within ourselves, challenges facing our communities and the needs of our neighbors, even the normal stresses of life and work and obligations can lead us to points where we feel lonely and defeated.

We pray that in this season of reflection, confession, and renewal, you would remind us, Holy God, that wherever our journey takes us, you are there to guide our steps and light our way. Enlighten the eyes of our hearts to recognize those times when barren lands can become opportunities for quiet solitude, a respite where we can leave distractions and anxieties for a while in order to experience deeper communion with your Spirit. Open our eyes to see the ways you invite us into conversation and accompany us on our journey. Help us to see clearly the paths you have revealed to guide us safely through the wilderness, and lead us to examine our words and actions in light of the life and ministry of Christ and, by your grace, enable us to be transformed into his likeness. When the way is dark and our hope is waning, give us glimpses of your kingdom that will provide strength for the journey. For your protection over us and your presence with us; for your truths that challenge us and your grace that accepts us; for the gift of brothers and sisters who walk with us and your call to welcome the stranger among us; for every good gift which comes from your generous hand, we offer to you all that we have and all that we are and lift our hearts in gratitude and praise.

In the name of the Christ who met our deepest need by demonstrating the fullness of God's grace and who showed us how to love by first loving us, we offer these and all our prayers. Amen.

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