

LIGHT + LIFE

Jesus is the light of the world. Jesus is the way, the truth and the life. "In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind" (John 1:4). Light is associated with knowledge. There is knowledge to share, insight to gain. When we are in the dark, we are blind; but when we are in the light, we see. Light is purifying truth. Life is a little different. When we think of life, we think of activity. Jesus brings a new way of life, a new way of living in this world. His ways are actually life-bringing instead of life-sucking. Following the mission of Jesus means being those who convey His light and His life to the world.

LIGHT AND LIFE • Luke 4:1–15 • Jennifer Holz • February 3, 2019

So, today is the day. The big showdown. I don't know if you've picked your side yet. Since you are here, I'm guessing you've already chosen who you want to win. I've heard today's big event described as good vs evil, darkness versus light. Those are pretty big claims. I've also heard it talked about as a showdown between age and experience and youth and, well...less experience. Whatever the case, I know who I'm rooting for. And, the reality is that the winner has already been determined...and I know who it's going to be. So do you. I'll tell you right now who is going to win...it's Jesus. It's always been Jesus.

And then there is that other showdown today (Patriots vs. Rams). It's kind of a small deal in the big scheme of eternity. So we aren't really going to talk much about that one. I'm referring to the cosmic showdown, the one that really matters and changes how we live and who we serve.

Open your Bibles to Luke 4:1–15 and let's read this *Super-bowl* story. The devil meets Jesus in the wilderness, and the showdown begins.

The Scripture here begins by telling us that Jesus was "led by the Spirit" into the wilderness where for forty days He was tempted by the devil. Luke gives us word clues to help us get the setting. "Wilderness, forty, led, tempted." If you are a student of the Bible (and some of you are), what emerges in your mind is another wilderness story. An ancient story of another time when Israel was led by God into the desert—and they lived there for 40 years—a place where they were tested and formed. What I want to do today is make the connection for you between the story of Israel, God's chosen people, and the story of Jesus, God's chosen One.

The Wilderness Revisited

In scripture, the desert is a known setting. In the Old Testament, the wilderness is a place of frustration and striving. A place of formation and failing. Of wandering and trusting. If we follow the path carved by Israel in the wilderness (recorded in the book of Exodus), it is one of confusion and trust, of worship and wandering, of doubling back and retracing steps and taking 40 years to take a journey that probably could have taken a couple months geographically speaking.

The desert story is familiar to many of us. We all know what it's like to hit a wilderness in our lives. To strive to make changes. To feel distant from God and lack hope. It's easy to get lost in the desert places of our lives. To long for something more, and to find that we are re-learning lessons we thought we had already mastered. Maybe some of you today are feeling like wilderness dwellers. Or you are close to someone wandering in the desert. But there is good news today.

Our Scripture today reads that Jesus was "led by the Spirit" into the desert. This is an intentional stop on His ministry journey. Luke tells us that Jesus has just been baptized, filled with the Spirit, and His public ministry is about to begin. But instead of going straight into it, the Spirit leads Jesus into the wilderness.

You see, there is work to be done in the desert. Unfinished business, if you will. And Jesus is the One to do it. The only One who can do it. *Do what*, you might ask? *What does Jesus need to finish in the desert?*

I submit to you this morning, that perhaps Jesus **had** to go to the desert to revisit the wanderings of Israel, to carve a new path. To undo the path of ceaseless striving and frustration, of despair and death. To forge a new way in the wilderness for us. And so the Spirit leads Him right into that place. To fill the desert with hope. To flood it with life and light and love.

40 years becomes 40 days. Each temptation that Jesus faces mirrors a testing that Israel faced. And each response that Jesus gives pushes back the forces of evil and carves out a new response to the temptations before Him. The temptations center around these areas: *Hunger. Worship. Trust.*

First, there is the testing of the empty stomach, of **hunger**. We read that Jesus is hungry after fasting for more than a month. The devil tells Him to turn the stones to bread—to alleviate His need. Israel too struggled with hunger, and they had to learn to trust God to feed them—in God's way...day by day. They had to trust God to give them daily bread, and not to hoard it. They had to learn that one "does not live by bread alone...but by every word that comes from the mouth of God." Jesus quotes Deuteronomy 8:3. Jesus will trust the Father to feed Him in the desert.

The devil then instructs Jesus to **worship** him, and he (the devil) will give Jesus the world. The children of God are tempted over and over to **worship other gods**, the gods of the cultures around them...to short-circuit their circumstances and find quick relief in accommodating to the practices of others. "Worship the Lord your God and serve Him only," Jesus again speaks from Deuteronomy This time chapter 6:13. Jesus chooses to worship the Father...to trust the path of the Father for Him. The Father will give to Jesus an everlasting Kingdom—but in the Father's time and from the Father's hand. As the devil attempts to break the relationship of Father and Son, Jesus speaks from strength. He knows who He is—one with the Father.

The devil then switches his tactics. He's a fairly quick study... Jesus keeps quoting Scripture, so the devil gives it a try... tempting Jesus to **put God to the test**. Is God really God? This time the devil uses verses from Psalm 91—which says that God will catch Him if He falls, and not allow even His foot to be hurt. *God would never allow Your suffering, Jesus. Test Him.* But Jesus is a student of the Word (well, He is the Word). Psalm 91 is a psalm spoken to those who "dwell in the shelter of the Most High." As a whole song it's about staying close to the Father. Choosing to find shelter in the Most High—not finding ways to put that to the test. Jesus quotes Deuteronomy 6 again where Israel is commanded, *do not put God to the test.* (Deuteronomy 6:16) And the Scripture refers to the time Moses and the people tested God at Massah. It didn't go well.

Hunger. Worship. Trusting God.

Did you notice that Jesus quotes Deuteronomy each time? This entire interchange is like an oral exam on Deuteronomy 6-8. Does Jesus know His Bible? Well...yes, of course. Probably best not to get into a war of words about Scripture with the author of Scripture. But the devil doesn't quite get this. The passage ends saying he'll be back for more. Not a quick study, but okay we'll look for that.

But let's take a moment and say a few words about the devil. He shouldn't get much air time, to be certain. But Luke introduces him in this story—and we get our first glimpse at his game plan, and what he's about. "Devil" (gk. diabolos) literally means deceiver, splitter (to throw through), the one who plants seeds of doubt and mistrust. He's the author of "fake news," for sure. His main goal in this story is to sever the relationship Jesus has with the Father. His voice will often sound like he cares about you and your situation...

- *Why don't you fill your own emptiness, your own hunger? Why be empty when you can be full and you can do the filling.*
- *God promises many things, but I can give them to you right now...for a small price. Why wait for God to give you good things when I can deliver now?*
- *Is God really for you? The Scripture says He won't let even your foot get hurt. Make Him prove it...test Him. Did He really say that?*

We've heard this voice before...in the garden in the beginning...the one who got this whole thing started—the one who is still at it—attempting to split our trust of God.

The devil will cloak himself as the one who knows what's what in your life. As the one who offers you the short cut—an easy way out of hunger, out of suffering, he will place himself in front of you as the one who can give you what you want and think you need. The devil will do everything in his power to stand in the place of the "giver of life" in order to destroy our dependence on our true creator. As one theologian puts it, he is a "shabby substitute."

A Shabby Substitute

I kind of like that phrase. It sticks. Next time you sense the deceiver tempting you away from the true giver of life...call him what he is...a shabby substitute. If that's all you remember from today—it's enough. The devil is a shabby substitute for God! Just walk away.

In 1969, Coke came out with its slogan "the real thing." From the moment coca-cola emerged on the scene, it began to evolve its marketing campaign. In 1886—the slogan was simply "drink coca cola." By 1906 the slogan was this: "The great American Temperance Beverage"—not quite as catchy. But Coke: "the real thing"—many of us have that embedded in our brains. That's from 1969, and then various forms of it followed: Have a coke and a _____ (smile). Coke is it! Can't beat the real thing. Just a few years after Coke begin, Pepsi emerged in 1893. It was called "Brad's drink" after its creator. And then renamed Pepsi-Cola in 1898. It's best known slogan perhaps, "the pepsi generation" or "generation next." And these two have been going head to head in the superbowls

of cola long before any of us were born. Likely one of these colas to you is the "real thing" and one is a "shabby substitute."

Regardless of whether you like pepsi or coke...how do we really know "the real thing" from a shabby substitute? Well, Luke's goal is that you would know the certainty of Jesus as God's son. The Holy Scriptures are not just a collection of sacred writings, but the Word of God which comes to us by the light of the Holy Spirit. The written Word of God points us to Jesus, the real thing. The light of Scripture leads us to Jesus, and nurtures a real relationship with God in Jesus Christ.

Follow Me

In the desert, Jesus gives us a pattern of faithful response, a pattern of faithful following. With each temptation, Jesus responds by speaking the Word of God. The Word of God lights the way in the desert. The Word of God shows us the path ahead when we are lost in the wilderness. The Word of God has power over the deceiver to push him out and help us find our way. Follow me, says Jesus. I will show you the way in the wilderness. Follow me, says Jesus, and you will find streams in the desert.

Isaiah prophesied hundreds of years before that Jesus would visit the desert:

- "The desert and the parched land will be glad; the **wilderness** will rejoice and blossom" (Isaiah 35:1).
- "Water will gush forth in the **wilderness** and streams in the desert" (Isaiah 35:6b).
- "I am making a way in the **wilderness** and streams in the wasteland" (Isaiah 43:19).
- "I provide water in the **wilderness** and streams in the wasteland, to give drink to my people, my chosen, the people I formed for myself that they may proclaim my praise" (Isaiah 43:20–21).

Jesus has been to the wilderness—and there is now light and life in the desert places.

Madeleine L'Engle was a writer who had immense influence on my life as a teenage girl through her *Wrinkle in Time* series. You may know that she was also a Christian writer. But her path, like many of us, was one of wandering for a long time. She grew up in the church and loved her parents. But her parents had her late in their marriage, and had established their own patterns that didn't include her very often. She bounced from school to school, eventually being dropped off at boarding school without warning, and she spent a lot of time with their Irish-Catholic housekeeper and her books.

When she was 17, her father died, and finding no comfort in the Episcopal community she was a part of, she walked away from organized religion and became a deeply "unhappy, deeply moral, artist-agnostic" who "also happened to read the Bible because her writing professor at an otherwise irreligious college told her to." And somehow the story of God embedded within her even when she was wandering in the

desert. The Word of God guided her. The Word of God lit her way. And her biographer writes this about her life: she taught us that it's not "our own light we bring to a situation, but the light of Christ we attempt to shine on others" (*A Light So Lovely*, Sarah Arthur).

"Your Word is a lamp for my feet and a light on my path" (Psalm 119:105).

Everywhere we go, we are assaulted with voices telling us what to think and how to think. Most of them further divide us. Consume this. Give your life to this. Try this. But the Word of God is our light. The Word of God is our guide. The Word of God draws us to Jesus. He is our light.

Sometimes at night, I get caught (probably like you) in a loop of anxiety. The desert rushes in to my brain and my heart...and I feel trapped inside. It's hard to sleep, I can't figure out the way out. The darkness feels real and heavy and impenetrable. In those moments, there is no rationalizing to bring peace. In those moments, I rely on the Word of God hidden in my heart to help me trust God. For me, it's usually the phrase..."The Lord is my Shepherd" that comes to mind. And I pray that over and over allowing the light of the Word to shine in my difficulty.

For Jesus, in the desert, it's Psalm 91...
"Whoever dwells in the shelter of the Most High will rest in the shadow of the Almighty. I will say of the Lord, 'He is my refuge and my fortress, my God, in whom I trust'" (Psalm 91:1-2).

Not a bad Psalm to hide in your heart for the desert times. Not a bad Psalm for the church to hang onto in times of strife and confusion. The desert is a place for us to cling to Jesus, to let the Word of God go deep and clarify our allegiance.

The wilderness is a tough place to be. But the Word of God is light and life in the desert places. Reminding us who we are and who we belong to.

This message is great news for us today! But let me offer this: it's not only for you and me. You have people in your life right now who are in the desert feeling alone, broken, isolated and hopeless. They need to know they are not alone. Jesus is there in the desert with them. The Word of God brings light in dark places. How might you love them simply and clearly in their place of need and hunger? A prayer, a note, a Word of hope.

Jesus wins the desert, and your voice of encouragement may be the light they need today. In fact the sharing of such news may be the most important thing that happens today.

Your word is a lamp, a light...and it beats back the darkness. Amen.

STUDY GUIDE
LIGHT AND LIFE
LIGHT TO BEAT DARKNESS
Luke 4:1-15

UP: **Connect With God Through Spending Time in His Word**

Read aloud the passage for the week: Luke 4:1-15.

1. What observations do you have about how Jesus uses scripture in this passage?
2. How does the devil use scripture?
3. When have you seen the Bible misused?
4. What role does the Bible play in your life? Is it an encouragement? A rule book? A defense? A weapon? Absent?
5. We grow in knowledge of God as we devote ourselves to the Scriptures. How has your own reading of the Bible influenced your understanding of God throughout your faith journey?
6. Describe a time when God's word sustained you in the midst of trial.
7. Moving forward, how can you hide scripture in your heart so that you are equipped in times of trial?

OUT: **Connect With the World Around Us (Join God in His Mission)**

Consider your conversations with non-Christians. What role does the Bible have? What role do you think scripture should play in these conversations?

IN: **Connect with Each Other**

One of our goals for our church is that we would all be in relationships where we "trust one another enough to apply scripture to each other's lives."

With whom do you have this sort of relationship?

If you are without this sort of relationship, consider joining one of our church Life Groups meeting throughout the Lenten season!