

# **GENEROUS**

# **LENT**

## **Sample Sermon 1**



# WEEK ONE: SAMPLE SERMON GENEROUS LENT

## FIRST READING:

Deuteronomy 8:1-14

## SECOND READING

2 Corinthians 8:1-9

## GOSPEL READING

Matthew 3:16-4:11

## LENT: WAITING UPON GOD

We find ourselves close to the start of the forty days of Lent and reading a familiar and challenging bible passage. Remember, Jesus has not begun his public ministry. No parables, no miracles, no crowds, no disciples. Before Jesus got busy doing things he waited for God to speak to him and he waited on God as he prayed and fasted. Lent invites us to press pause and wait on God. Not just *waiting for* something to happen, treading water until Holy Week. I mean waiting upon something, waiting upon God to speak to us, encourage us, challenge us, to change us.

## GENEROUS LENT

Now, traditionally Lent is about three spiritual disciplines: a commitment to prayer, a commitment to fasting and thirdly – a commitment to alms-giving or what we would call today, generous giving. Prayer we get. Fasting we get, at least giving up chocolate! But we don't tend to think about giving as a spiritual discipline.

So in our first two Sundays in Lent we are thinking about a Generous Lent and generous discipleship. If giving is a spiritual discipline it is much more than having enough to pay our way as a church. Generosity is the life of God himself, who loved the world so much that he .... gave his only Son. Generosity is a spiritual discipline. It's opposite is to desire and to hold on to wealth and this really gets in the way of following Jesus. Let me illustrate.

*Martin Frobisher was an Elizabethan explorer who set out to discover the North West passage for Queen Elizabeth 1st or die trying. In 1576 he set sail, landing at what is now called Frobisher Bay which he at first believed to be the North West passage. Among many things Frobisher brought home a lump of black rock with something glistening in it, pronounced to be gold.*

*Frobisher set off again, in 1577 and again in 1578 with royal and financial backing. This time his true purpose was indicated by a crew Cornish tin miners and heavy digging equipment! Frobisher shipped back home 200 tons of this rock and built a refinery to extract the gold. However, as the Encyclopaedia Britannica puts it, "Frobisher's single-minded pursuit of ... treasure limited the exploratory value of his voyages, and, when the ores he brought back from his third voyage proved to contain neither silver nor gold, his financing collapsed, and he was forced to seek other employment". Frobisher went on to fight the Spanish Armada alongside Sir Francis Drake, dying of a gunshot wound in 1594. But what to do with these tons of useless rock with traces of iron pyrites? It was crushed and used thrown on the roadways of London. The origin, apparently, of the saying that the streets of London are paved with gold.*

So, from our Gospel reading I want to explore four things, maybe four points of a compass to navigate a generous Lent.

- The Promise of God in the wilderness
- The Presence of God in the wilderness
- The Purpose of God in the wilderness
- The Priority of God in the wilderness

## 1. THE PROMISE OF GOD IN THE WILDERNESS

Our bible reading for Lent is mostly about the temptations of Jesus in Matthew 4 but Matthew wants us to start a little earlier. Look at the first word of 4:1: then Jesus was led up by the Spirit. With that little word Matthew links the story of Jesus' temptations with the story of Jesus' baptism. A game of two halves as we say. Both stories take place in the wilderness. Both stories speak of the Holy Spirit. Most importantly, both stories are about Jesus as the Son of God: This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased (Mt 3:17) and, If you are the Son of God... (Mt 4:3,5)

In his Baptism Jesus is affirmed as the Son of God, loved and valued. That is the promise of the wilderness. It is true for Jesus and true for us. We are loved by God, valued by God and called by God. That's the starting and finishing point of all discipleship. As Christians, at the start of Lent, we need to hear this, deep inside. Not just once but many times.

*Originally from Scotland Sheila Walsh found fame as a singer-songwriter in the contemporary Christian music scene in the early 1980's, releasing over 20 albums. In 1987 she became co-host of the American Christian TV talk show The 700 Club with around a million viewers each week. [1] She had everything – and nothing.*

*Sheila's public ministry and personal identity were in conflict. One night she broke down in tears, on air, and the next day she voluntarily checked into a hospital. Despite her success Sheila writes, "after months of feeling as if I were disappearing a little bit more every day, I had finally reached out to a friend for help, and this was where that journey had taken me".*

*It was not an easy decision. She was advised that she would damage the ministry of The 700 Club, that she would never be trusted again, that she would never get her ministry back. Sheila told them. I'm not trying to save my ministry; I'm trying to save my life.*

*The doctor asked her: Who are you? She replied, I'm Sheila Walsh. The doctor spoke kindly: I know your name Sheila, but who are you? "I'm the host of The 700 Club". "I didn't ask what you do, I asked who you are" Stumped Sheila said, "I don't know". On the day she checked out of the hospital the same doctor asked: "Sheila, who are you?" She replied, "I am Sheila Walsh, daughter of the King of Kings". [2]*

Sheila's honest and moving story powerfully illustrates what can happen when who we are and how we live are set adrift from each other. So when we think about a Generous Lent, generosity is not just what we do as disciples, it is about who we are as people caught up in God's love.

[1]The 700 Club is a longstanding, right leaning conservative TV programme: [wikipedia.org/wiki/The\\_700\\_Club](https://wikipedia.org/wiki/The_700_Club)

[2][www.sheilawalsh.com/who-we-are-in-christ](http://www.sheilawalsh.com/who-we-are-in-christ). Walsh has written several books including It's OK Not to be OK. Her discography and publications are at [wikipedia.org/wiki/Sheila\\_Walsh\\_\(author/singer\)](https://wikipedia.org/wiki/Sheila_Walsh_(author/singer)).

Generous discipleship doesn't start with what we give or we should give but about what has been given to us by the grace of God. And when we know that what we have is a gift from God then it transforms our giving. So let's take our first compass bearing on our journey into generosity – and for me this is the true north:

- ***Everything we have is God's gift to us and we are caretakers, stewards.*** *Generous discipleship is much more than giving a little time, talent and treasure to God's Church. It is giving all we have and all we are to the God who has given everything to us. So, when we talk money let's make sure we mind our language. It's not 'my money'. Instead let's practice and attitude of gratitude. Our words shape our thinking and our actions.*



## 2. THE PRESENCE OF GOD IN THE WILDERNESS

Matthew's story starts with the promise of God in the wilderness and moves on to speak of the presence of God in the wilderness. The Holy Spirit who settled on Jesus in baptism now leads Jesus up into the higher wilderness above the Jordan valley so that Jesus can be tested spiritually. It's important we note that the Spirit of God takes Jesus into the wilderness – and takes him there for forty days. The devil only has a walk on part; and a few lines on stage.

While Jesus is there he is hungry. Luke tells us he didn't eat anything but Matthew tells us that Jesus was fasting. It's one of our spiritual disciplines. Here's the thing. Baptism tells us who we are. The Temptations ask how we will live.

[We could dig a little deeper here. Only Matthew tells us that Jesus is in the desert for forty days and forty nights. As Peter Kay would say, 'What's all that about?' Matthew's mostly Jewish readers knew their Bibles. They knew about forty days and nights of rain for Noah, forty days and nights for Moses on Mount Sinai (Ex 34:28), the prophet Elijah's forty days and nights journey to meet God at Mount Horeb (1Kgs 19:6). And in 4:1 see, the Spirit of God led Jesus up into the wilderness. This is the OT word used of Israel being led up out of Egypt into the desert for ... forty years.]

In the Bible and in the history of the church when people do serious business with God then time in the desert is where it is done. It's a place of spiritual challenge and spiritual growth. That's how it was Moses, for Israel, for Elijah. That's why the Holy Spirit leads Jesus up into the desert. There is no short cut, no easy ride to mature Christian discipleship.

Sometimes, as in Lent, we choose to ask ourselves the hard questions. We choose self-discipline. We choose to pray, read and learn. And sometimes, as the saying goes, life throws us lemons. Hard things just happen, we don't choose a cost of living crisis or interest rate rises which hammer rents and mortgages.

The Spirit of God led Jesus up into the wilderness. The story encourages us to know the **presence of God**, whatever our personal wilderness might feel like. Tough times are not times of God's absence but of his quiet presence.

Now, it's hard to talk about generous giving in tough times or when we are fearful of tough times. But generous discipleship is not an optional extra, only for the good times. So here's a second compass bearing to consider as we think about a Generous Lent.

- ***Are we praying and thinking and asking God to help us on our journey into generosity?*** Or doing what we have always done? Who could we talk to who can encourage us in our giving or support us if we feel overwhelmed by money worries?

### 3. THE PURPOSE OF GOD IN THE WILDERNESS

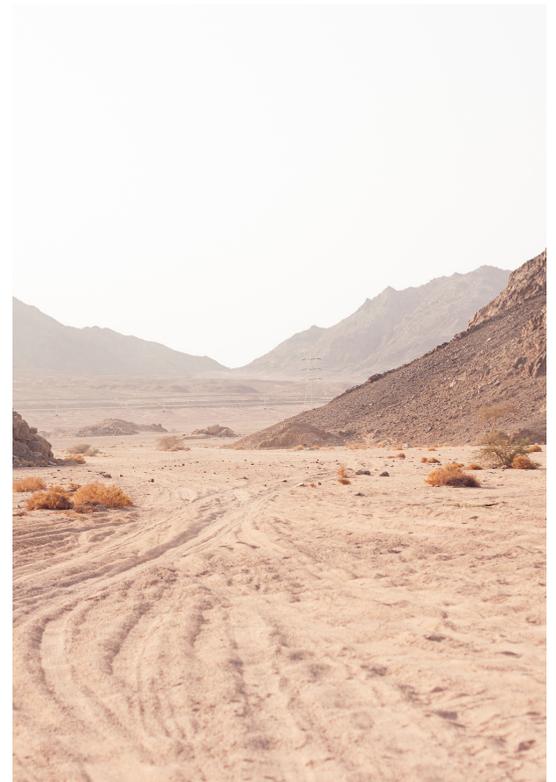
The promise of God in the wilderness is that we are the children of God. The presence of God in the wilderness is the assurance that even in tough times God's Spirit is sustaining us and deepening our discipleship. So what is the purpose of God in the wilderness?

We use the traditional language of temptation but that is only half of the meaning. We can also talk about Jesus tested in the wilderness. That's a different and richer word that is also important. We might say that, temptation is about trying to get someone to do the wrong thing. Testing is about seeing if someone will choose to do the right thing.

When Jesus is tempted he replies to the devil each time with quotes from the OT book of Deuteronomy and here's what Deuteronomy chapter 8 has to say about God's purpose in the wilderness:

*Remember how the Lord your God led you all the way in the wilderness these forty years, to humble and to test you in order to know what was in your heart, whether or not you would keep his commands.....Know then in your heart that as a man disciplines his son, so the Lord your God disciplines you (Dt 8:2,5)*

This is really important. God's purpose in the wilderness was not to punish but to test Israel. It was to reveal to the people the attitudes of their hearts and the actions of their hands. Most importantly the testing was because God is a Father to his people. When the chips were down, Israel learned just how little they trusted God: when they needed water or were hungry. Or when they had food, called manna, but worried it would not be enough or might not arrive tomorrow. They couldn't trust enough while Moses was meeting with so they built a golden calf. We know in our own lives that tough times and sometimes tough love changes us, usually for the better.



The simple but important reality is that money and how we live with it is a huge part of our lives. We make money decisions every day. Some are small, some shape our lives. So it makes sense that what we do with money is a vital part of our discipleship, of what it means to live as a Christian. And some of our money decisions reveal our hearts to us. Here's a challenge from Fr John Dresko, a retired Orthodox priest in the States, written back in 2003:

*"My gift to God is a genuine reflection of my heart. If I give \$400 per month to the bank on my car loan, but think the Church is fleecing me for \$20 per month, I have a heart problem. If I do my grocery shopping and write a check when I leave for \$100 so my family can be fed, but think \$20 per month is too much for the Bread of Life, I have a heart problem.*

*If I can go to the package store and drop \$20 for a bottle of liquor but gripe about the costs of sharing the Blood of Christ, I have a heart problem. If I cheat the Church out of regular giving by pleading about my "cash flow" while ignoring the fact that the Church has the same bills and the same "cash flow," I have a heart problem. [1]*

So, here's a third compass bearing as we explore a Generous Lent.

- ***What does my giving to God's work in our church reveal about the attitudes of my heart to money, possessions and living faithfully as a follower of Jesus?***

[1]From a 2003 sermon on the Widow's Mite (Mark 12:41-44). Permission to reproduce is gratefully acknowledged



#### **4. THE PRIORITY OF GOD IN THE WILDERNESS**

Finally, let's look briefly at each of the three temptations [and we can start with a story.

*The Kalahari desert is hot and hunting there is hard, thirsty work. There is a shrub with a pint of water in the roots but it is hard to find without catching a monkey. For this you need a small vase tied to a handy tree and some rock salt. The monkey comes down for the salt in the jar and the hunter catches the monkey and feeds the rock salt until the monkey is thirsty and leads the hunter to the shrub.*

*Why does the monkey not run away? Because its paw is small enough to reach into the jar but with a handful of rock salt it is too large for the neck of the jar. The monkey is caught because it will not let go of the salt.[1]*

[1]The story is told in different ways so may be apocryphal or has grown in the telling. The southern Kalahari is classed as a desert; the northern portion receives much more rainfall but does not have surface water due to deep sands.



Whether it is monkeys and their salt or Frobisher and his gold money can trap us, even if for some the cage has golden bars. The temptations are different but have one thing in common. They invite Jesus to claim the gift of being God's son but without the obedience to his Father. It's no accident that our need for money and possessions plays a big part.

- The first temptation, turning stones into bread, is all the more subtle for being so obvious. We need bread and clothes and shelter and much, much more. But we have to receive these things as God's gift, receive them with gratitude. The devil tempts Jesus to **provide for himself** instead of trusting God for what he needs.
- The second temptation, to jump from the roof of the Temple, seems to be about impressive stunts not matters of money. Jesus says, you shall not test the Lord your God (Dt 6:16) and this comes from an Exodus story of Israel grumbling at Moses because there is no water. They demand God does something and they doubt that God is really with them (Ex 17:1-7). The devil tempts Jesus here to **presume for himself**, to force God's hand, to require God to protect him, sustain him. Instead of God centred trust the devil invites Jesus to self-centred living. The temptation invites Jesus not to hold life as a gift but to lay claim to the gift. [1]
- Finally in Matthew, the devil offers Jesus all the world's power and wealth if Jesus would only kneel and worship. In making a naked appeal to greed, money and power the devil invites Jesus **to promote himself**. [2] Jesus can have the riches, the glory of the world but at the cost of his soul. [3]It's no accident that it is in response to the temptation to wealth that Jesus replies, get behind me Satan. These are the same words he will say to Peter when Peter suggests Jesus can be a Messiah without the cross, without obedience (Mt 16:23)

[Now, the phrase 'fall down and worship' here is exactly what the Magi did when they brought their gifts to the infant Jesus at the start of Matthews' Gospel. And all authority in heaven and earth is what Jesus is given at the end of Matthew's Gospel. The devil offers Jesus the world's wealth but God will give to Jesus all authority - after the obedience of the cross. The devil wants from Jesus the worship Jesus has already been given at his birth and which is due to God alone. (Mt 28)]

[1]The phrasing is from Prof PD Miller

[2]Provide for himself, presume for himself and promote himself is an insight from an unknown source and so cannot be credited

[3]Recall the powerful scene in *The Fellowship of the Ring* where Frodo offers the Ring of Power to Lady Galadriel. She would take the ring to put right all wrongs but would be devoured by its evil: all shall love me, and despair. [www.youtube.com/watch?v=WeQDTj1UIIA](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WeQDTj1UIIA)

## 5. COMING IN TO LAND

The promise of God in the wilderness is that we are the children of a heavenly Father. Our discipleship begins with who we are not what we do. Our generous discipleship begins, with knowing all we have is God's gift, entrusted to us.

The presence of God in the wilderness is the assurance that we are not alone whether we choose the disciplines of Lent or when tough times come to us. The wilderness is not the place of God's absence but of his quiet presence.

The purpose of God in the wilderness is to test our hearts and our actions. Baptism affirms who I am: a child of God.. The wilderness testing asks me how I will live – including the hard questions around living and giving generously.

The priority of God in the wilderness is for us to learn obedience and trust in God's loving provision for us. Money can capture our hearts and we forget God is the Giver of all we have. So, a final compass bearing for a Generous Lent:

- ***Are we practising the spiritual discipline of generous giving?*** Money has a gravitational pull on our live; it can capture us. The single, most important thing we can do to be free is to give, regularly and generously. When we give we refuse to be captured by wealth, we refuse to worship mammon. When we give, we express our worship, our gratitude and our trust in the God who gives us all things. Amen.