My brothers and sisters in Christ, let us pray. Lord God of our Hearts, Minds, Spirits, and Souls, may the words of my mouth and the meditation of all of our hearts always be acceptable in your sight, our strength and our redeemer, Amen.

It’s no accident that this Scripture appears in all three of the synoptic gospels. What does that mean again? Synoptic? “With the same eye”. It means that the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke are focused on the events of Jesus’ life, but with slightly different emphasis. But there’s still some comfort in the familiar, isn’t there? We hear the transfiguration each year, a little different, and this temptation narrative is much the same thing: a story that varies a bit from Gospel to Gospel, but it’s still got that same theme throughout each of the Gospels. Jesus overcomes the temptations that are set before him. It’s nice to know that all’s well that ends well. That we can start Lent off with a win.

I think what resonates with us in particular this year in this passage is the word, “wilderness”, sometimes translated as “desert”. What are some of the images that come up when we’re talking about a wilderness? (take all answers). All kinds of stuff, right? Lions, and tigers, and bears, oh, my! They are places which are unexplored, unfamiliar, full of things we’ve never seen or encountered before. Oh, and the fact that most movies about wilderness include raging rivers that must be crossed and bottomless chasms that have only a single old rope vine or bridge across them. There’s danger, too.

So let’s also get into our imagery here that when we are in these places, it’s not somewhere that’s all that safe to be alone. And yet, wildernesses, by definition, don’t include a lot of settlements or people. In modern Hebrew, one of the words for wilderness can also be translated as “the wordless place”. While we might at times want to get away from it all, I don’t know that we would want to find ourselves so far from everyone that help was not within earshot. Or within an hour’s drive or so if we got into trouble.

The bible seeks to show us that, although we may be living in the middle of the city, metaphorically speaking we are in wilderness at various points in our lives. In uncharted scenarios. Living situations and conditions. With people we may or may not want to be with. We feel alone, and scared that if we shared exactly how we felt with each other, how vulnerable it feels, that we might not get the comfort we need or seek. So we go into the wilderness and wordless place to try and work it out.

It’s part of our culture to continue to think that we are individualistic, self-sufficient, and can do most things on our own. But we also carry with us the accumulation of our lives to date, don’t we? We carry with us our treasured friendships and love relationships, we can if we think about it actually hear voices of people who are long dead but still in our hearts and souls. As much as we think we are alone during our times of trial, we’re not.

Still, the wilderness places gnaw at us, and we want an end to how uncomfortable they feel. Jesus wanders for 40 days. I have to imagine that our wilderness times can feel just as long as they weigh on our hearts and souls. The timeframe of “pandemic” and “quarantine” that COVID has brought I don’t believe most of us would have imagined could be more than two years. And while we want to keep our loved ones desperately safe, we’ve all had more than our fair share of living life alone when we would not have chosen to do so before February 2020. And as much as we may or may not believe we are alone in our thinking this way, it’s been hard because we could not gather to share our collective angst, or more importantly, our collective hug to feel each other’s soul energy, and know that yes, this too shall pass.

The Bible promises that, you know. Nothing ever came and stayed. It always “came to pass”.

There’s lots of other images in this passage. I’ll leave us to our own thoughts to figure them out. Think of it as less of leading you out in the wilderness and leaving you there and more of a test of what God has taught us along the way or our respective journeys.

I’ll leave you with these final thoughts.

Even Jesus isn’t alone in the wilderness. Who’s there with him? Sure, satan, fine, that’s not where I THOUGHT we were going with this. Right…it’s the Holy Spirit. Even Jesus relies on God the Sustainer to get through getting tempted by the shortcuts offered to him. To never want for more, to be all powerful, to be able to live forever—these are the things we pray for in our weaker moments, and it’s why they are never granted.

And yet, these are the temptations that we seek when we are up against it. More money to solve our problems. To be in charge and in control of all the things and people in our lives so that we can call all the shots and calm our emotions. And for us or our loved ones to be healed whenever we wish it, or simply to wish plague away from all things, for all time.

The wild place of fears, doubts, and alone-ness is no more. Ugh. But we would have no more questions. No more reliance on our experiences and our ancestors. No more anticipation and hope or joy.

Maybe we want God in our heart to be with us to cry as well as laugh. To guide us rather than decide for us. And to give us grace and others to get us through. Let us hear you Lord, as we cry out from our wilderness places and souls. Are you there? Testing, 1,2,3… Can you hear us now? Thanks be to God. Amen.