

“When Angels Arrive Late”

Matthew 4:1-11

1st Sunday in Lent

February 26, 2023

Westminster, Greenville

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During the season of Lent, we are embarking on a sermon series called, “Back to the Basics”...a series in which we will explore some of the basic, most fundamental doctrines of the Christian faith.

Lent is a time for self-examination.

A time to reflect on who we are, and whose we are.

And in an age when denominational affiliation means less and less, in a time when the meaning of church membership itself has become much more fluid, I thought it might help for us to spend time probing and questioning and holding up some of the most fundamental claims that the Christian faith makes.

So we’ll start our sermon series with this question:

What does it mean to say that Jesus is the Son of God?

This claim lies at the heart of the Christian faith.

We believe that Jesus of Nazareth was not simply a wise man, not just a loving teacher and preacher who did a lot of good things in his short life, not only a faithful Jew who followed God with passion and purpose...

Christians claim that Jesus was God’s only Son.

But what does that mean?

The New Testament offers a variety of perspectives on this question.

For example, if the Apostle Paul were sitting in the pews today, he would point us to his letter to the Romans—the first text we heard this morning.

In that particular text, Paul writes that Jesus:

“...was descended from David according to the flesh and was declared to be Son of God...by resurrection from the dead.”

In other words, for Paul, it is Christ’s resurrection that makes him the Son of God.

Paul does not write:

“...because of the many miracles he performed, Jesus was declared to be Son of God.”

Or...

“...because of his wisdom and great teachings, Jesus was declared to be Son of God.”

For Paul, the resurrection is the important point.

That is what makes Jesus the Son of God.

But Paul’s not the only one with an opinion about this.

If the Gospel writer Luke were sitting in these pews today, he might approach Paul after worship and say, Paul, I think your answer is incomplete.

And Luke just might remind Paul of what happens in the first chapter of his Gospel. When Gabriel tells Mary:

“The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God.”

In other words, according to Luke, it's the mysterious presence of the Holy Spirit acting upon Mary, the mother of Jesus, before Jesus is ever born.

That's what makes Jesus the Son of God.

Of course, if the Gospel writer John were in the Atrium, sipping coffee and overhearing Luke and Paul discuss all this, John may chime in and tell them that neither of them has their timing right.

They haven't gone back far enough.

Do you remember the way John described it at the beginning of his Gospel?

“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God...No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known.”

According to John, Jesus goes back with God to the very beginning of time, to before time...it's the eternal existence of Christ that makes Jesus the Son of God.

Have you ever thought about it before?

Do you have a preference among those three answers?

Look...I don't share all that to confuse you.

I share it to ENCOURAGE you.

To say that even the biblical writers themselves did not approach their answers to the question: what does it mean to say that Jesus is God's Son...in exactly the same way.

But no matter how you approach the question, I hope that when you leave church today, some part of your answer to the question has something to do with the WILDERNESS.

That's what our Gospel text for today tells us.

That being the Son of God had something to do with Jesus entering the wilderness.

According to Matthew, the Spirit leads Jesus into the wilderness on the heels of his baptism.

Jesus has just heard the voice of God tell him, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

And then Jesus is in the wilderness for 40 days.

And after those 40 days, Jesus hears another voice.

The tempter's voice.

A voice that says to him, "If you are the Son of God..."

And Jesus has to figure out what it all means, to be named "Son of God."

All of that takes place when Jesus is hungry, and tired, and all alone...all by himself, in the wilderness.

Being the Son of God has something to do with entering the wilderness.

Let me pause, and make a confession:

I'm not a big fan of the wilderness.

I certainly enjoy going hiking in mountains, just as long as I have a nice, comfortable bed to sleep on indoors at night.

I realize many of you may like the wilderness more than I do.

See, I'm something of a wimp when it comes to the wilderness. Sleeping OUTSIDE, under the stars, not really my thing. I don't enjoy camping very much, and back when I was a boy, growing up in Michigan, I quit Boy Scouts when I was a Tenderfoot because it meant being outside all day, in the winter, in 10 degree weather, waking up in the morning with a head scarf frozen on my face...

I'm not a fan of the wilderness.

But if I'm going to profess and claim and believe that Jesus is the only Son of God, then I've got to take another look at the wilderness.

Because the Bible tells us that following his baptism, Jesus spent time discerning what it meant to be the Son of God. And he did not do this in a royal palace, he did not do it on the beach, he did not do it in a vacation home in the mountains. He went into the wilderness...tempted in the wilderness, struggled in the wilderness....and you know what I mean when I say wilderness, right?

I'm not talking "Walden Pond" here.

I'm not talking geographical wilderness.

I'm talking about the SPIRITUAL wilderness that each of us faces at certain times in our lives.

The trials, the deserts when we feel empty and overwhelmed.

THAT wilderness is absolutely key when it comes to claiming that Jesus is the Son of God. It's a wilderness that comes in many different shapes and sizes.

For example, there's the spiritual wilderness of grief.

C.S. Lewis spoke of it after he lost his wife to cancer.

Lewis wrote, “I cannot even see her face distinctly in my imagination...But her voice is still vivid. The remembered voice—that can turn me at any moment to a whimpering child.”¹

The wilderness of losing someone you love.

Or how about the wilderness of guilt?

Or loneliness?

Or fear?

I suspect that each of us has known the wilderness, at some time in our lives. And what Matthew tells us today is that part of what it means for Jesus to be the Son of God is that the Son of God does not avoid the wilderness.

Jesus does not live above human temptations and trials and suffering.

He enters into it.

He seeks it out.

Back when we lived in Dallas, I recall learning about George Truett. Truett was pastor at First Baptist Church in Dallas at the turn of the 20th century. He pastored that congregation for more than 40 years, growing its membership from 700 to over 7000.

But there was an event in Truett’s life that almost derailed his ministry early on. A member of Truett’s church, JC Arnold, invited Truett on a hunting trip one day. As they were walking, Truett shifted his rifle from one shoulder to the other, and it accidentally went off, hitting JC Arnold in the lower leg.

¹ C.S. Lewis, *A Grief Observed*, New York: Bantam Books, 1976.

Arnold said no big deal.

The doctors, when they saw the wound, said no big deal.

But Arnold ended up dying of complications from that gunshot wound, and George Truett—one of the best-known preachers in the city—was haunted by what he had done to his friend.

He was filled with shame and sadness and guilt.

He was in the wilderness.

And then one night, Truett—who had been planning, because of the accident, to leave the ministry—he had a dream.

A dream in which God said to him, “Do not be afraid!”

And Truett got back into the pulpit. Truett learned firsthand that God’s grace is not just found in the milk and honey of the Promised Land.

God’s grace was also there in the wilderness.²

That’s why we need to pay attention to the wilderness.

Not just in our own lives, but in the life of Jesus.

You see, I think Jesus found grace in the wilderness too.

The last verse of our text from Matthew reads like this:

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

² The story about Truett and J.C. Arnold can be found on many different internet sites. I first heard of it in a sermon entitled “The University of Adversity,” by the Rev. Dr. Cleo LaRue, preached at Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church, New York City, June 1, 2014.

There it is, right there—after his trial and temptations, God’s grace arriving in the form of angels to wait on him the wilderness.

Funny thing, though.

Have you ever thought about the timing of that grace?

The more I think about it, that’s a puzzling verse.

After all, why did God wait?

Why did God send the angels THEN?

- If Jesus is God’s beloved Son, why didn’t the angels accompany Jesus when he entered the wilderness?
- Or why didn’t God send the angels after a couple weeks, when Jesus is desperate for food?
- Or why didn’t the angels arrive on day 40, when the devil shows up on the scene?

In other words, angels arrive NOT when Jesus enters the wilderness, NOT when Jesus is desperate for food in the wilderness, NOT when Jesus is doing battle with the devil in the wilderness.

Angels show up at the end.

After Jesus has struggled and suffered in the wilderness.

I believe that Jesus learned that being the Son of God meant he belonged in the wilderness, and that God’s grace will be found in the wilderness, oh yes...and yet, even being the Son of God did not give Jesus control over when and how that grace will arrive. It’s a lesson Jesus learned not just at the beginning of his ministry, but also at the end.

Do you remember the scene in the Garden of Gethsemane?

When Jesus prays, Father—take this cup from me...yet not what I want, but what you want.

That was Jesus in the wilderness once again.
The Son of God wanted God's grace at that moment.
And the grace of God did not arrive *in the way he wanted* at that moment.

Have you ever experienced something like that?

I suspect all of us have had moments in which we did not receive God's grace in the way that we asked for it, or at the time that we wanted it, or in the manner that we believed God should give it.

I know what I do at those moments.
I hedge my bets.
I try to take control.
And that's the difference...

Why do I believe Jesus was God's only Son?
Because unlike you and me, Jesus did not try to take control.
He was perfectly obedient to God, trusting in God all the way through.

He trusted God's grace all the way to the cross.
He trusted in God to get him through the wilderness...

Mary Ellen Geist used to be an award-winning journalist, but a number of years ago, she left that life to return home to Michigan, to help her mother.

Her mother was spending her days taking care of Mary Ellen's father, who suffered from Alzheimer's.

Upon her arrival home, Geist's eyes were really opened up, not just to her father's condition, but to the ways in which her mother was sacrificing her life to be a caregiver for Mary Ellen's dad.

At one point, Geist uses the following analogy for her mother. She talks about the father of a friend, an expert hunter, who was out hunting geese one day. He saw a flock [of Canada geese] going over in V formation. He zeroed in on the last large goose in the flock.

The gun went off. It was NOT a clean hit.
And he saw the wounded bird begin to lose altitude.
The bird fell slowly, trying to save itself.

Then he saw something he had never seen before.

A bird from the front of the V suddenly pulled out of formation and soared beneath the wounded bird as it fell, cradling it on its wings as it helped to bring the wounded bird back up to the V. The father said he was so stunned he simply put his gun down and watched.

He presumed this was the bird's mate (Canada geese are known to mate for life). He watched as the healthy bird continued to carry the wounded one on its back until it began to be dragged down by the weight.

"He...stood in the woods for some time," Geist writes, "thinking about a partnership so strong you would jeopardize your own life to save another."³

³ Mary Ellen Geist, *Measure of the Heart: A Father's Alzheimer's, A Daughter's Return*, New York: Springboard Press, 2008.

Do you know anything about this kind of partnership?

Sure you do.

So let me invite you to consider the place in your life right now where you're wounded, and in the wilderness...and then let me invite you to remember who it is you're following, the one who is at the front of the V in which you and I are flying: Jesus of Nazareth.

And Jesus wasn't just a good person who lived long ago.
He is the very Son of God.

He is the one who, at this moment,
 has peeled away from the front of the line...
 and he's heading straight for you.

Amen.