

“Running on Empty”

Luke 4:1-13

1<sup>st</sup> Sunday in Lent

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Westminster, Greenville

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Some of you may remember the best-selling book by Laura Hillenbrand—it was later turned into a movie—about a WWII veteran who survived one of the most harrowing ordeals I’ve ever heard of.

The name of the book is *Unbroken*.

The name of the veteran—he died a few years ago—was Louis Zamperini.

When Louis’s plane went down in the Pacific in 1943, he and two other airmen made it out of the aircraft alive, and ended up on a small life raft in the middle of the ocean. After getting their bearings, they quickly realized that their only source of nutrition was a few chocolate bars, placed in the pocket of the raft for survival at sea.

They had to be fair and cautious with those bars of chocolate.

Who knew how long they’d be on the raft...

A couple days? A whole week?

They would need to RATION the chocolate to help them survive.

They went to sleep the first night, woke up the next morning.

Louie looked in the pocket for the chocolate...and it was gone.

During the night, while the other two were sleeping, one of the men gave into his fears—and ate every last piece.

Hillenbrand goes on to describe in excruciating detail what those three airmen faced while they drifted on the raft. Occasionally they caught an albatross or fish, but mostly they went days without food to eat, days with only minimal rainwater to drink.

HUNGER overtook them:

- They described their favorite meals to each other over and over again.
- Their faces sunk in.
- They thought about eating their shoes.

One crew member eventually died, but Louis Zamperini and the other airman survived **for 47 days!**

When they finally landed on a Japanese-controlled island, they were taken to a medical unit, where they were weighed.

At the start of the war, Louie weighed 155 pounds.  
After 47 days starving on a raft, he weighed around 80 pounds.<sup>1</sup>

It's an incredible story.

And it was only the beginning of Louie Zamperini's ordeal.

But I share all that not to draw your attention to Louie Zamperini.

I share all that to draw our attention to Jesus.

I want you to picture, in your mind's eye, **what Jesus looked like** when he spent—not 47 days, but 40 days—fasting in the wilderness, doing battle with the devil, all those years ago.

Is he strong?

Is he confident?

Is he swatting away the devil's offers like a tennis ball...whack, whack, whack?

No, no.

You recall what the text tells us.

Luke says that he was "famished."

Luke says he "ate nothing at all during those days...."

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<sup>1</sup> Laura Hillenbrand, *Unbroken*, New York: Random House, 2010.

No bars of chocolate, no fish to eat.  
Can you picture Jesus, after those 40 days without food?

Here's my picture:  
He was weak.  
He was depleted.  
No energy, no strength...

Jesus was *running on empty* in the wilderness.  
THAT'S when the devil comes to him.

And the devil says to Jesus:  
**It's time to fill your life.**  
**It's time to stop feeling empty.**

“If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread.”

There are two levels that Luke is working on here...on the one hand, there's the physical emptiness, the hunger that Jesus faced.

But on another level, there's the SPIRITUAL hunger that Jesus faced.

Do you remember when these temptations take place?  
Right on the heels of Jesus' baptism.  
With his hair still dripping of Jordan River water, Jesus goes into the wilderness, and it's a kind of turning point in Jesus' life.

Up until his baptism, what line of work was Jesus in?  
What did he do?

He was a carpenter, that's right.

And then, for whatever reason, he puts down his carpentry tools, and he goes to the River Jordan to be baptized by John.

But what will that mean for him?

It's not like God told him at his baptism—you'll do this, and then this and then you'll go to the cross to die.

At this point in his life, Jesus has performed NO MIRACLES. He hasn't healed anyone, he hasn't cast out any demons.

At his baptism, he heard a voice that told him he was God's Son, the Beloved...but what does that mean?

You see, when Jesus enters the wilderness, he's confronting SPIRITUAL hunger. His life is about to take new shape, new definition...he's going to have a new identity.

What will all that mean?

Who is Jesus going to be?

That is the central question of this text.

Let me pause right there, and ask you—have you ever confronted that kind of question, that spiritual hunger before?

Maybe you've just entered retirement.

You were used to the grind and demands and rewards of your career. And now that career is over.

And it was good.

And it provided for your family.

And yet...you feel a kind of hole, a void in your life.

There's a part of you that now feels empty...who are you going to be?

Or maybe the divorce is now final.  
Your children are grown and out, and your marriage is over.  
It wasn't the way you pictured your life 25 years ago.  
And you're hoping you still have plenty of years ahead.  
But there's a hole...an emptiness...who are you going to be?

Of course, what's fascinating about the struggle that Jesus experienced in the wilderness is that it wasn't his own doing.

And it wasn't the devil's doing.  
The SPIRITUAL EMPTINESS that Jesus was wrestling with...it wasn't brought about by some terrible tragedy or chance event.

It was brought about by God.  
Did you notice that?

Let me get at it like this.  
Back when I was in seminary, I occasionally preached at my home church in Michigan as I was going through the ordination process.

And my family had a tradition, well before I went to seminary, of spending Sunday lunch talking about the Sunday morning sermon. We did this as I was growing up, had wonderful preachers in my home church growing up, and it was fun to talk about their sermons.

But after I started preaching at my home church, this tradition...did not change.

In fact, it picked up some gusto.

One of those sermons that I preached back then was on the temptations of Jesus. And after church, we were at lunch, and I was fielding questions from my parents...I thought I was doing pretty well, swatting the questions back over the net, whack, whack, whack.

Then my sister asked me a question.

“Ben, why do we pray in the Lord’s Prayer ‘Lead us not into temptation’ when today’s story said it was the Holy Spirit that led Jesus into the wilderness?”

Now I should have known better, but I challenged my sister:  
“What do you mean the Holy Spirit? Jesus was tempted by the devil.”

To which my sister replied, “Right, but the Holy Spirit led Jesus there. That’s what it says. Why would the Holy Spirit want Jesus to be tempted?”

Game, set, match—goes to my sister!

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Why indeed?

The first line of our text for today reads like this:

***Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, where for forty days he was tempted...***

The One who leads Jesus to be tempted and tested is God.  
In other words, the One who leads Jesus to an empty place is God.

Why would God ask Jesus to go to this place?  
 Or more to the point—why does God lead us, or let us go to our  
 own empty and barren places, at different times in our lives?

Your job disappears.  
 Your child struggles, no matter what you do.  
 The results of your treatment are not what you had hoped.

I cannot give you a good answer for why.  
 I do not believe that these hardships are simply the will and way of  
 God.

But I do believe this.  
 When we are confronted with our own emptiness,  
     there's a question, the same question, that confronts us all:

Will we try to fill the emptiness on our own?  
 Or will we let God fill us?  
 Will we let God define us?  
 Will we rely on the mind and imagination of God to give us our  
 identity?

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After Father Gregory Boyle published his best-selling book,  
*Tattoos on the Heart*, he received countless invitations to speak,  
 including at the campus of his alma matter, Gonzaga University.

So, as is his custom, he took two former gang members with him  
 to speak about their experiences.

One of them was named Mario.

Mario, Boyle writes, *is among the most tattooed of any of our  
 trainees—and at Homeboy Industries that's saying a lot. His arms are*

*“sleeved out,” neck blackened with the name of his barrio, and his entire face is covered...*

*I had never been in public with him and was surprised by people’s reactions in the airport. People would widely sidestep him. Mothers would pull their kids in more tightly. The recoiling was pronounced and widespread.*

*And yet, [if] you were to ask anyone at Homeboy who is the kindest, gentlest person who works [there], they would not say me, says Father Boyle. The answer would most certainly be Mario.*

So Father Boyle, and Mario, and another young man give multiple talks to different students and campus groups at Gonzaga. Mario’s story of his previous life was filled with violence, abandonment, abuse of every kind...and his life-story always moved people deeply, even though it was difficult to tell.

At the keynote event in the evening, there was a time for questions after the speeches.

The first question was from a woman in the front. She stood and said that she had a question for Mario. He gingerly approached the mic.

“You say you’re a father,” the woman began, “and your son and daughter are starting to reach their teenage years. What wisdom do you impart to them? I mean, what advice do you give them?”

Mario trembled some, he closed his eyes, and said:  
“I just...”

Then silence.  
He tried to find his words.



“I just...”

More silence.

Then:

“I just don’t want my kids to turn out like me.”

He was sobbing, and everyone could see it.

The audience was silent.

No one made a move to fill the silence.

Then the woman stood up again.

Now it was her turn to cry as she pointed to Mario, her voice steely and certain through her own tears.

“Why wouldn’t you want your kids to turn out to be like you?” she said.

“You are gentle, you are kind, you are loving, you are wise.”  
She steadied herself, planting herself firmly as she then said:

“I *hope* your kids turn out to be like you.”

There was no silence then, Boyle recalls, because all one thousand attendees stood and began to clap.

The ovation seemed to have no end.<sup>2</sup>

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Do you know what it’s like to have God fill the emptiness that’s inside you, in ways you never dreamed?

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<sup>2</sup> Gregory Boyle, *Barking to the Choir: The Power of Radical Kinship*, New York: Simon & Schuster, 2017.

That's what God wants to do with all of us...not with what's in our imagination, but with whatever is in the imagination of God.

What would happen if you took a close look at whatever empty space in your life, and you looked at all the ways you could fill it:  
 with more work, or more money,  
 or a bigger home, or the adulation and praise of your peers—  
 and then you stepped back and said no...  
 I'm going to let God fill the empty space...

I'm reminded of a story about Nikos Kazantzakis, the author of the novel, *The Last Temptation of Christ*.

I read this story somewhere.

I tried to verify it, I couldn't verify, but it's a wonderful anecdote.

Apparently, in one of his books, Kazantzakis talks about how, as a young man, he used to visit various monasteries, interviewing the monks who lived there. In one interview he engaged an old monk who had a great reputation for holiness.

He asked this monk: "Do you still struggle with the devil?"

"Oh, no," the old man replied, "I used to struggle with him, when I was young, but now I've grown old and tired and the devil has grown old and tired with me. We leave each other alone!"

"So it's easy for you now?" asked Kazantzakis.

"Oh no," replied the old man, "it's worse, far worse!  
 Now I wrestle with God!"

"You wrestle with God," said the surprised Kazantzakis,  
 "and hope to win?"

"No," replied the old monk,  
"I wrestle with God and I hope to lose!"<sup>3</sup>

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Like I said, I don't know if that story is true.  
If that really happened to Kazantzakis.

Doesn't matter.  
Wrestle with God, and hope to lose?  
During the next 40 days, may this be the gift that God gives to you.

Amen.

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<sup>3</sup> As told in "Wrestling with God," by Ron Rolheiser, November 18, 2001, at [www.lifeissues.net](http://www.lifeissues.net).