

3.9.2022 Midweek

Pastor Timothy McKenzie

“The Things that Count” (Ella Wheeler Wilcox); Luke 4:1-13

“Faithfulness”

*Grace and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus the Christ. Amen.*

This evening’s midweek theme is “faithfulness” – the faithfulness of God to us and to our neighbor in the wilderness. Tonight’s theme is also about *our* faithfulness to God in the wilderness of our lives.

The poem that I read a moment ago is by Ella Wheeler Wilcox (1850-1919), an American author and poet who understood the wilderness. Wilcox understood suffering and loss, having lost her only child, a son, shortly after he was born. Ella Wilcox also lived in the wilderness of her own time, a time of war, while also working for women’s rights and the rights of animals. Wilcox published widely and in her autobiography she wrote that humanity gathers wisdom and knowledge from God in order that we might “receive light and power” as we pass through the many rooms of the Father’s house.

Wilcox’s poem, titled “The Things that Count,” is a poem in which she talks of working for justice and doing good in the small daily actions that we do over and over again “no matter what others say.” Her poem speaks of prayer as the thing that changes fear and loneliness into song and joy. Her poem also speaks of walking with faith and love in all things, so that with God’s help, we will always be able to walk with trust and hope. Ella Wilcox is an example of living in the wilderness of life by doing good, praying, and walking with “faith, hope and love.” As she said, “These are the things that count.”

The things that count and matter most in life are the often the small day to day acts of goodness, faith and love that we do for our neighbor. Yet the world always cries out for louder and bigger spectacles, rather than small quiet acts of goodness and love. Our daily faithfulness to God and to our neighbor gives hope in life’s wilderness moments – these are the things that count.

The gospel reading for this evening is the text about Jesus’ temptation in the wilderness. Though this was also our text on Sunday, it is worth continuing to think about because Jesus’ time of testing in the wilderness as a model of hope and strength for our own journeys. Like Jesus, we too, face temptation and testing by sin and evil in our own wilderness struggles in this world.

In the prayers for this evening, we will also take up the theme of life’s wilderness moments and struggles. As a way of imagining the biblical text of Jesus in the wilderness, I invite to look at the back of your bulletin and the painting by William Hole titled, “Temptation of Jesus in the Desert.” This image will also be used during tonight’s prayers on the Internet live-stream. What I find helpful about this image is that Jesus is shown walking alone in an isolated wilderness. This suggests that

when we face times of temptation and testing, we also may feel utterly alone. We may feel isolated from human community and we may even feel isolated from God. In this painting, Jesus walks with purpose carrying a staff and wearing sandals.

The sandals on Jesus' feet suggest the words of Ella Wilcox's poem, "of walking with feet faith-shod." For me, this means that we walk by faith with the grace of faith covering us like a pair of shoes or sandals, helping us walk through the wilderness. In William Hole's painting, Jesus is shown walking on very rocky ground, and the sandals, of course, helped him walk with purpose and courage.

This is what faith and faithfulness do; faith allows us to walk through life's many landscapes and wilderness moments of testing. "Faithfulness" begins by not forgetting that faith, like a pair of shoes or sandals, is what carries our feet as we travel the often-rocky ground of challenges and temptations. Daily faithfulness in small things carries us when we no longer know the direction in which we should walk.

Another thing that William Hole's painting of Jesus captures very well is the feeling of isolation in the wilderness. The story of Jesus' temptation in the wilderness contains two figures, Jesus and the devil. The devil tempted Jesus in the loneliness and isolation of the wilderness. Jesus responded to the devil's temptations by remaining faithful to God's word and God's presence in the wilderness.

There is something important to think about here. It is easy to practice the conversation of prayer with God when things are going well, but it is harder to keep walking, allowing faith to guide our steps, when we are struggling or tested. It can feel like we are alone with evil in the wilderness.

It is impossible for me to look at this painting of Jesus walking in the wilderness and not remember the over 2 million Ukrainian people who are also making a very unexpected Lenten journey in the wilderness. Over 2 million Ukrainian people have become refugees walking in the wilderness of war and uncertainty. Jesus' temptation in the wilderness reminds me that in moments of testing, we walk by faith, always trusting that God walks with and helps us.

I also cannot watch the news about these refugees without remembering the time that my wife and I were evacuated from Tokyo after the meltdown of the Fukushima nuclear power plant. Less than 36 hours after the earthquake, tsunami and nuclear meltdown, we had to pack our car, making decisions about what we would take and what we would leave behind, all while not knowing if we could return to our home. Of course, we were not in a war zone that was experiencing hostile military shelling, but we were evacuated by the church for fear of nuclear fallout. Though our evacuation experience was brief and we were allowed to return to Tokyo after a few weeks, as someone who has already lived

through a nuclear meltdown, it has been hard to see news reports about the shelling of a nuclear power plant in Ukraine.

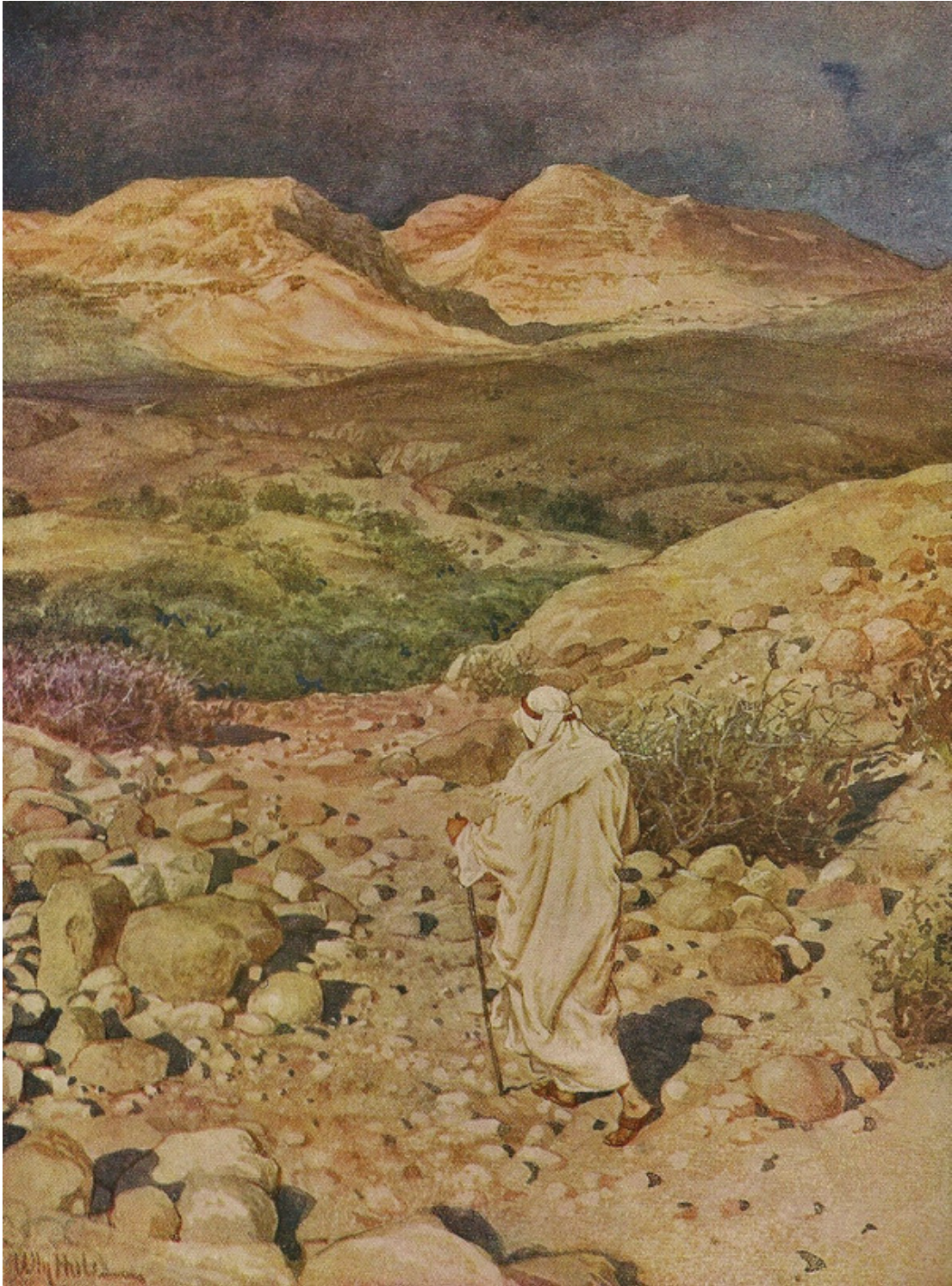
Faithfulness to God and our neighbor begins by walking with faith – by walking as if faith were the sandals or shoes on our feet. There is no wilderness that is wholly absent of God; rather, it is God’s presence that makes the wilderness holy. There is no war zone or calamity in which God is not present. There is no wilderness in which we will ever be separated from God’s love and grace. My thoughts and prayers are frequently with the many people of Ukraine who are walking in the wilderness. May they experience God’s faithfulness and the compassion and love of others along the way.

When we were evacuated from Tokyo, we had friends in the south of Japan who welcomed us, and it is my fervent prayer that the 2 million Ukrainian refugees will be met by faithful friends, new friends and old friends, who will show them love and compassion – because these are the things that count.

Faithfulness is about doing the “the things that count” by embodying God’s love and compassion for others in the wilderness of life. This Lent, may your faith in God’s presence and your faithfulness to others be renewed, helping you to accompany others in the wilderness. During Lent pray for peace in the wilderness, as you work for peace in your community and for peace in places far away.

Each day, walk by faith, offer hope, and embody love in all things to all people. These are the things that count. Amen.

*(William Hole’s painting “Temptation of Jesus in the Desert” is on the following page).*



Temptation of Jesus in the Desert (c.1906) by William B. Hole (*public domain*)