

*St. Thomas's Episcopal Church, New Haven*  
*March 9, 2025*

After his baptism, 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 by the devil. He ate nothing at all during those days, and when they were over, he was famished. The devil said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread." Jesus answered him, "It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone.'"

Then the devil led him up and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. And the devil said to him, "To you I will give their glory and all this authority; for it has been given over to me, and I give it to anyone I please. If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours." Jesus answered him, "It is written, 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.'"

Then the devil took him to Jerusalem, and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here, for it is written,

'He will command his angels concerning you, to protect you,'

and

'On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.'"

Jesus answered him, "It is said, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'" When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time. ~Luke 4:1-13

If you know the music of Aaron Copland, you know he has a signature sound. You might think of *Appalachian Spring*, or *Fanfare for the Common Man*, or *Billy the Kid*. His style is so strong and memorable that it's hard to imagine that, believe it or not, there was a time before Copland was "Copland" — when the Copland we know *waded through* to some degree, a gifted but rather bland young composer who was having trouble finding his voice. A critic called his first published pieces a "crude mix of Debussy and Liszt." The good news is that it wasn't long before Copland came to realize he was writing the music that he *thought* he should be writing. And it wasn't long before he made a rather bold choice to solve this problem: he decided to pick up and move to Paris — to leave everything behind and spend some time far away. Copland chose to leave his ego behind and give himself over to a teacher who, more than any other, helped shape composers at that time, turning them upside down, shedding them of influences that held them back, helping them find their true voice. Her name was Nadia Boulanger and she charged \$4.20/lesson.

Copland was 21 and had little to survive on beyond the \$4.20 he needed for his lessons. But he made the move. When he got to Paris it wasn't long before he began to sense just how far away he was from home, family and friends. As a young Jewish person who felt safe in his Brooklyn neighborhood he hadn't anticipated facing anti-Semitism but he did while in Paris, sometimes quite openly. Hardest of all he was preparing to leave behind all he knew as a musician, all that he'd cultivated for years. And yes, his uncompromising teacher took him deep into new terrain — the rarefied music of Palestrina and Gesualdo — asking him to write in styles and genres that were completely new to him. She sent him essentially into a *musical wilderness* to help him strip away all that was holding him back, all that had come to define him. She invited him to take another look at everything he knew, everything he loved and cherished; a fresh look from far away.

“I saw home more clearly from across an ocean,” he would later say. He saw, from afar, what he would describe as a *vast openness*, the openness of his Brooklyn neighbors and of those endless, straight-line vistas on the open highways of the American heartland. And he came to choose two musical intervals — what we call the open intervals, the fourth and the fifth — as his musical building-blocks. With open intervals he could paint open musical landscapes, and in the process begin to find a distinctive and personal voice. He got there, as we know [🎵] but not until after some time in a wilderness, a desert filled with challenge and with discovery. A time away that led him back to himself.

Luke tells us today quite bracingly of Jesus’ time in the wilderness, in a physical, literal desert. Moments after his baptism, as a young man, we’re told he was led there, straight to the desert, by the Holy Spirit to leave everything behind that had become comfortable for him; to face essential questions and to strip all away that might have come to define him— all that might have come *understandably* to define and hold him, given who he was: power; pride, self-sufficiency. He’s put to quite a brutal test to learn who he really is, to shape his call and his identity, and then to head back into the world as none other than him, the divine one, here to offer himself as a reconciling, healing, restoring gift.

We begin the season of Lent each year with images of the desert and the suggestion that, each in our own way, we are invited into and perhaps even called into to some time there of our own. Some time to consider leaving behind some of that which has come to define or hold us and even perhaps to define us too well: to take a look from the outside at the patterns and rhythms of our lives. Some time to come face-to-face with ourselves and listen for the voice of God; some time to find our *own* voices. Time away, time to see with fresh perspective; time to hear and know God’s voice and call to us each in new ways, with new clarity.

In the rather raw words of a monk who has spent much of his life in the desert, *We go to the desert for a total encounter with ourselves. We go to the desert to see more and to see better. We go to the desert to take a closer look at the things we would rather not see, to face situations we would rather avoid, to answer questions we would rather forget.*<sup>1</sup>

The same monk offers a quick and important aside. Time in the desert, he says, is not a time of “doing penance.” It is not a time of suffering for suffering’s sake. That’s not why the Spirit led Jesus into the wilderness and it’s not why we go there either.

We’re called there rather for *encounter* — and the good news is that, though that path is not easy, it has been paved for us by thousands upon thousands who have entered it before.

The desert tradition in Christian practice extends far back, all the way to its earliest days in the third century. Desert Mothers and Fathers sought the desert as the place where they thought they might best live out their faith as the church in that time became increasingly cozy with the secular world. They sought the desert for its silence, simplicity and solitude, for its time away, for the encounter with honesty it demands.

None of this of course was easy for them nor is any of it easy for us, *solitude* perhaps most of all. The wonderful 20th-century priest and mystic Henri Nouwen called solitude “nothing less than *the furnace of transformation*,” and wrote, “Solitude is the true place of conversion, the place where the old self dies and the new self is born. It’s where *the emergence of a new person* can take place.”

It’s the solitude of Moses and Elijah, who, like Jesus, spent time in the desert coming face-to-face with temptation and listening for the voice of God.

Moses was born for service and he knew it. But in his youthful zeal, he killed a man. and had to run for his life. He spent 40 years in the wilderness trying to figure out how to fulfill his call, how to be Moses. 40 years in the desert, 40 years of solitude and simplicity. And one day, in a burning bush, of all things he would finally come to hear God’s voice, finally hear, understand and accept his true call.

Elijah spent 40 days and 40 nights in the desert after years as a prophet, preaching himself raw and barely escaping death. The Spirit led him to the desert for a time of solitude and silence, a time to listen for God’s voice. And listen he did. Elijah heard a mighty wind. Can God be that wind, he wondered? No. He heard an earthquake. Could God be heard there? No. In the fire? No. Finally, after forty days, he heard God’s voice. He heard God’s voice in the sound of sheer silence.

So yes, there’s a pattern here! Retreat. Some alone time. Silence. Not easy for us either. Yet desert wisdom tells us that “without silence, words lose their meaning, that without listening, speaking no longer heals, that without distance, closeness cannot cure.”

This is the essence of desert wisdom.

And yes, it is wisdom embraced by Jesus himself. The Spirit sent *even him* to come face to face with all of those things that might have held and kept him from that pure, essential love he came to share and to reveal.

And so, finally, today, here in New Haven CT on the first Sunday in Lent in 2025- what about us? What might this call to some time in the desert mean for us? Shall we book our tickets for Paris? For a hermitage? For somewhere far, far away from here?

Here’s the very interesting answer of that same monk who spent much of his life in the desert. *You don’t need to go out and search for a desert. You can find it in a corner of your house, on the highway, in a crowded street. The desert is a good teacher. It’s the place where you can rediscover the roots of your existence. But we must first renounce the blackmail of pressure, the glitter of appearance, the domination of activity. We must find simplicity. Then the desert is not where the sand blows in the wind but where the Spirit waits to make a place of dwelling within us.*

Amen.

1. Pronzato Alessandro: *Meditations on the Sand*