

### Spiritual Disciplines Do Not Earn God's Love or Prove Us Worthy, But They Can Help Us to Remember Who We Are, to Become Stronger, and to Receive God's Unconditional Love

At Jesus' baptism the voice from heaven says, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased." Immediately afterward, "we read today of Jesus out in the wilderness," the Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander said in his sermon Sunday, "a wilderness which he encounters not because of the cares of this life, or because of dumb luck, but because he is led there by the Spirit of God.

"And so, in the span of a few short verses, a seismic shift has occurred," Pastor Thelander continued. "Jesus has gone from the banks of the Jordan River to the middle of nowhere. He has gone from baptized and blessed to famished and hungry. He has gone from 'This is my beloved Son,' to 'If you are the Son of God, . . .' He has gone from 'you are,' to 'if you are . . .' He has spent forty days and nights in the middle of nowhere, and he is no doubt famished. Matthew probably understates it when he says, 'He became very hungry.'

"Jesus is alone and utterly depleted. All that remains to him is the Word of God. All that he has left is the promise that was just given to him in his baptism that he is *somebody*, that he is God's Beloved. All Jesus has left is the promise of *who* he is: *You are my beloved Son*.

"But when you are in the middle of nowhere and you haven't eaten for forty days, it can be hard to remember what happened in the Jordan River. And if it wasn't hard enough, the Tempter seizes the opportunity to make it even more difficult. He comes to Jesus and he says, 'If you are the Son of God, *prove* it.' . . .

"Do you see what the Devil is doing here? He is tempting Jesus to doubt *who God says he is*. He is tempting Jesus to doubt what has just been spoken to him in his baptism. 'You are' is now being challenged with 'if you are'.

"The enemy's tactic is masterful. He is tempting Jesus to believe that being beloved is something he has to *prove*, rather than something he already *is*. . . . What a masterful strategy, for if Jesus becomes uncertain or insecure about who he is, then the pressure to force God's hand to provide for him and to protect him becomes immense.

"In that sense Jesus may have been no different from you and me. . . . The waters of baptism are wonderful, but the fact is that we don't stay there for very long. The promise made to us in our baptism that we are God's beloved is wonderful, but eventually the road we travel also leads to the wilderness—and in the wilderness we cannot see the banks of the Jordan any longer. And so we wonder: Am I who I (p. 2→)



Giovanni's statue of Nicodemus in wood, about 1518, Collections of Applied Arts, Castello Sforzesco, Milan. Image credit: [www.wikimedia.org](http://www.wikimedia.org). In the Gospel reading Sunday, we'll hear that when Nicodemus went to Jesus by night, Jesus said that the new birth which one must experience to see the Kingdom of God is by the mysterious working of the Holy Spirit. The accompanying sequence hymn will be William Cowper's *God Moves in a Mysterious Way*, sung to *St. Peter* by Alexander Robert Reinagle.

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**Sundays**  
10:00 a.m.: Word & Table service  
11:30 a.m.: Refreshments, conversation  
11:45 a.m.: Post-service discussion  
6:00 p.m.: (First Sundays only) Evensong

**Tuesday and Thursday, 6:30 p.m.: Lenten Evening Prayers**

**Readings, 2/17:** Gen. 12:1-8; Ps. 33:12-22; Rom. 4:1-17; John 3:1-17. **2/24:** Ex. 17:1-7; Ps. 95; Rom. 5:1-11; John 4:5-26, 29-42.

**Prayer Emphases:** Mauritius; Evangelical Lutheran Church in America; St. Thomas Episcopal Church, NYC, and the Rev. Andrew C. Mead; Habitat for Humanity; parishioners on Butte View Drive.

**(Sermon, cont'd.)** thought I was? Am I who God says I am? Does God really love me? Is God really in control? This is when the enemy comes to us with . . . the challenge to forget *who we are*. He tempts us to think that being beloved is something we must *prove* rather than something we simply *are*. . . . In a word, he tempts us to think that God's love for us is *conditional*." The Holy Spirit strengthened Jesus "to affirm his true identity, . . . and it should not be lost on us the context in which this occurs. Jesus has been fasting for 40 days," which we'd assume "would make Jesus weak and vulnerable—but ironically, the very opposite happened. His sustained spiritual discipline gave him a 'holy focus' . . . that was integral to that strength—something as out of vogue and dull as fasting". Spiritual disciplines do not make us worthy, but they can strengthen us, help us remember who we are, and "make us more receptive to God's love."