

**The First Sunday of Lent
March 1, 2020**

**In the name of the God of all Creation,
The God alive in each of us as God was alive in Jesus,
And the power of God known in the Spirit.
Amen.**

Before I begin my remarks about Jesus in the Wilderness, I'd like to say a few words about the wilderness that we find ourselves in today ... the wilderness around the coronavirus. The news reports from around the world are startling, and now there are accusations that the threat of Corvid-19 is being politicized. So, I don't want us to over-react ... but, then again, I believe it would be foolish to under-react.

So, whether it is Corvid-19 ... the strain of coronavirus that originated in China ... or the seasonal influenza, or just the common cold, there are things as a gathering community that we need to do to protect all of us, especially the most vulnerable. Handed out with your worship booklet this morning is an outline of some of the protocols we are suggesting for this community of faith as we gather for worship.

- First of all, if you are not feeling well, or if you are coughing or running a fever, please stay home. Your symptoms may be mild, but if you are contagious, you could infect someone else who is more vulnerable to whatever it is that you may be carrying, so for their sake please stay home.
- Secondly, wash your hands often ... and thoroughly. According to health experts, this is by far the most effective way to stop the spread of disease. If you can't wash your hands, please use hand sanitizer. And, there is hand sanitizer in every pew.
- Regarding Sharing the Peace in our liturgy: At St. Cyprian's this is quite a production with just about everyone greeting everyone else ... often with handshakes and sometimes with hugs. I hope that we can retain the enthusiasm ... a Greek word that literally means "filled with spirit" ... only without physical contact. So, eye contact and a reverent bow, an elbow "bump," a wave, or the Peace sign will be the new norm.
- And, regarding the Common Communion Cup ... the Chalice: Most people receive the wine by drinking from the common cup ... the chalice ... or by "intincting" ... dipping the wafer into the wine in the common cup.
 - First, drinking from the common cup ... the chalice: Scientific studies have shown this to be completely safe when chalicist wipe the cup appropriately. There are references to these studies on the sheet that was handed out.
 - Secondly, intincting is much more unsanitary than drinking from the chalice. The danger of a person contaminated fingers touching the wine itself, or the side of the chalice, are very high, and so intinction by the person receiving communion is highly discouraged. If you desire to receive by intinction, please make sure you have used hand sanitizer before coming to the altar, receive the wafer in the palm of your hand and leave it there, and the Chalicist will pick it up, dip it into the wine, and then put it on your tongue.

- Thirdly, holy communion is complete without drinking the wine. Just because you do not drink the wine doesn't mean that you received only "half-communion." So, the decision is entirely yours to make. If you do not desire to receive the wine, just cross your arms across your chest, and the Chalicist will hold the cup in front of you and say the words of institution but without you actually receiving the wine.

Finally, as much as I may be tempted to shake your hand as your leave, please understand that for everyone's sake it is best that I not do that

I was ordained in 1975 ... forty-five years ago. Since then I have communicated thousands of people and shaken thousands of hands in receiving lines. Beyond that, I've consumed what's left in the chalice after Holy Communion, quite literally drinking behind thousands of people over my ordained vocation. And I promise, I get sick at the same rate the rest of us do!

In a time of fear and panic, let us continue to be with one another, and continue to be at the Eucharistic feast with each other. As I take seriously what Jesus took seriously I firmly believe Jesus would do the same.

Now ... Jesus and the Wilderness.

For me each Lent is a time take stock of who I am and who I am becoming. I take seriously the "Invitation to the Observance of a holy Lent" that is read on Ash Wednesday. It calls faithful Christians to spend these forty days in "self-examination and repentance; prayer, fasting and self-denial; and reading and meditating on God's holy word." In many ways these forty days are not too dissimilar from the forty days Jesus spent in the wilderness: turning away from the temptations of the devil; prayer, fasting, and self-denial; and responding to the devil's claims with God's holy word.

We all know this story of Jesus being tempted by the devil in the wilderness. However, what we often forget is that the designers of the lectionary inserted a page break between this story and the story immediately preceding it ... the story of Jesus' baptism. Greek language in the time of Jesus included no punctuation or paragraph formatting as we know it today. In the earliest bibles there were no chapters and verses, so one story would just run into another. In Matthew's gospel it reads:

And when Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased. Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil.

For me it raises several questions: "What is the relationship between Jesus' baptism and his wilderness experience?" And: "What is the relationship between the spirit that leads Jesus into the wilderness and the devil who tempts him?"

Our usually interpretation of this story is that it is about the divine power within Jesus to thwart the power of Satan. But, I think the story is much, much more than that. True, I could be accused of anthropomorphizing the story ... that is, reading human life experience into the story rather than letting it tell me about the divine nature of God and Jesus. Yet, it is just that human experience of Jesus that opens for me a new and powerful relationship to God.

You see, I think this story is about Jesus as a human choice-maker. He is confronted with options and has to faithfully discern how he is going to both live into the fullest image of God, and to do the will of God. He has just been blessed, now he has to figure out how to live that blessing so that he too will be a blessing to others ... and to God.

Jesus is in the wilderness and is offered three possibilities: feed his own hunger; miraculously save himself from danger; and rule the whole world at the cost of his soul. To each option he responds to the devil not with his own words, but with words from scripture. By the end of Jesus' wilderness experience Jesus knows what he will not do, but I believe it takes the rest of the gospel story to tell us what Jesus will do. By the end of Jesus' wilderness experience Jesus knows who he is not, but I wonder if he really knows who he is until he is hanging on the cross.

What might Jesus have known about himself after the baptism that he did not know before? And what might Jesus have known about himself after the wilderness experience that he did not know before? I think these are questions to ponder, not necessarily to seek definitive answers, for I think any clear answer would only generate more questions.

But what if we look at this story as our own story? What do we know about blessing and wilderness in our own lives? In what ways do we discover and define self in the face of adversity in those places and times in our lives that feel like uncharted territory?

When I think of Jesus in the wilderness the image that comes to mind is that of the barren region around the Dead Sea, a region full of rocks and sand and little or no vegetation. When I think of the metaphorical wildernesses of our lives I think of times and places where we find ourselves without physical, emotional, and spiritual sustenance. Those times and places feel barren and forbidding. It is uncharted territory without reference points or landmarks and no map to follow. Most of all it is lonely, even when we notice that there are others in the wilderness with us.

How do people like us find themselves in the wilderness? In Matthew's gospel it says that the spirit "led" Jesus into the wilderness. Interestingly, in Mark's gospel the verb is "driven" which has more of the meaning of "being thrown out," or "being torn from." Being "led by the Spirit" is very different than being "driven by the Spirit." Being "led" sounds to me like I am being guided, whereas being "driven" sounds more like being chased. However, in my own experience and the experience of others I have known, they can both be true.

Some people find that they are led into this wilderness. They grow up with their family, friends, the church, and the world around them telling them who they should be. Nevertheless, slowly they come to understand that they are somehow very different from those expectations placed upon them by others. Led by their own inner voice calling them to be who they know themselves to be they enter a wilderness. This is often the experience of gay and lesbian persons as they "come out" to their family, their friends, their church, and the world around them.

For others the experience is that they are driven into a wilderness by tragic life events. Just when they feel God's blessing upon them as they've never known it before an accident happens, or disease strikes or a loved one dies. They are torn from their old lives and thrust into uncharted territory without familiar landmarks and signposts. Without a map they wander in a barren land for what seems like ages. They thirst for love, hunger for support, and ache with emptiness. And they ask, "Where is the God that blessed me at my baptism?" and "Why would God drive me into this wilderness?"

When Jesus was in the wilderness the devil tempted him with three things: nourishment for his hunger; miraculous ability to save himself from danger; and power to rule his world. Jesus refused Satan by quoting from the word of God. When we are led or driven into the wildernesses of our lives we are tempted the same way. Sometimes the emptiness that people feel is so immense that they try to feed their hunger with alcohol and drugs. Sometimes when the danger is overwhelming they face their fears with a bravado that mimics the miraculous. And for those whose life has spun out of control being able to micro-manage even a small part of their environment becomes almost a necessity.

In this story Jesus encounters the devil, the tempter, Satan. Another ancient name for this entity is Lucifer, which means “light bearer.” One has to wonder the role of this antagonist in the drama and what light he brings to the situation.

Personally, I have been in wildernesses in my life. When I was there I was starving, feeling extremely vulnerable to the emotional and spiritual dangers around me, and totally unable to control anything in my life. I felt empty, alone, and afraid. At times I literally didn’t know which way to turn. I had lost my bearings in life and could not find a map with a spiritual path to lead me to safety. I felt I had been driven into the wilderness, yet at times I wondered if I had actually led myself over the line in the sand.

When I look back on those wilderness experiences I remember the landscape well. With time I came to see that I was discovering who I really was, and who I was becoming. The challenges I faced, and the choice I had to make, were like a light shining in the darkness. I also know that, in spite of my fears in the midst of the wilderness, I was never alone. Matthew’s gospel ends this story with the words:

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

God was with Jesus in his baptism, and was with Jesus in the wilderness. God is in the blessings of life, and God is in the challenges of life. The same Spirit that alighted upon Jesus at his baptism is the same Spirit that “led” or “drove” him into the wilderness. When Jesus left the wilderness he knew more about who he was, and who he was not, than when he entered. He also knew about who he was becoming.

As we begin our pilgrimage to Easter we are invited into the “Observance of a holy Lent” by self-examination and repentance; prayer fasting and self-denial; and by reading meditating on God’s holy word. This holy word we heard this morning is about Jesus in the wilderness. But this story is also our story. It is about our own self-examination and prayer and fasting. It is about reaching the new life of Easter knowing who we are and who we are becoming as blessed children of God ... “led” or “driven” by the Spirit into wildernesses ... and waited upon by angels.

So, how is this story your story? What do you know about being blessed by God’s Spirit? And what do you know about being “led” or “driven” into a wilderness in your life? What is the testing that you encounter there, and what have you learned about who you are, and who you are becoming? Remember, along with Jesus, this is our journey to Jerusalem. If we are to take seriously the new life of the resurrection promised at Easter, then we must also take seriously the Observance of a holy Lent.

Amen.