

**The First Sunday of Lent
February 18, 2018**

**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.**

I imagine many of you have come to this sanctuary this morning to hear words of comfort following the horrendous shooting in Parkland this past week. Then ... instead of words of comfort ... we are confronted with the story of Jesus in the wilderness on this first Sunday in our Lenten season. These may not be words of comfort, but I hope that they are words of assurance that God's love surrounds us ... and the people of Parkland ... even in times when we have been driven into wilderness not of our choosing.

In six short verses from the Gospel of Mark we hear that Jesus left his hometown of Nazareth, was baptized by John in the Jordan, saw the heavens torn apart and declared as God's beloved, then driven into the wilderness for forty days, and returned to Galilee to start his ministry of preaching the Kingdom of God.

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 narrative 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 identity and Jesus as a choice-maker. Jesus is confronted with options ... with choices ... and he 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 at his baptism, now he has to figure out how to live that blessing so that he too will be a blessing to others ... and to God.

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 don't think there are definitive answers to these questions, rather they are ones to ponder.

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 our own selves through the blessings we have known, as well as in the face of adversity in those places and times in our lives that feel like we are in 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.

The account in Mark's gospel leaves all of these questions unanswered. But the few details he does include in his account are telling, and they give us much to cling to as we face deserts in our own lives. I'd like to focus on three:

Jesus didn't choose the wilderness.
The struggle is long.
Along with the beasts, there are angels in the desert.

First, Jesus didn't meander into the wilderness. He didn't schedule a National Geographic expedition, or plan a wilderness marathon to rack up Fitbit steps. According to Mark, the Spirit "drove" Jesus into the wilderness.

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

Imagine ... if you will ... the students, teachers, friends, and families of those effected by the shooting in Parkland on Ash Wednesday. Parents sent their children off to school that morning as blessed and beloved children of God, and by that afternoon their world had turned into an unimaginable wilderness of grief, and anger, and disbelief. This wasn't a wilderness of their choosing ... it was tragically thrust upon them.

Jesus didn't choose the wilderness any more than we do. We don't volunteer for pain, loss, danger, or terror. But the wilderness happens, anyway. Whether it comes to us in the guise of a hospital waiting room, a thorny relationship, a troubled child, a sudden death, a crippling panic attack, or another horrendous school shooting the wilderness appears, unbidden and unwelcome, at our doorsteps. It insists on itself.

Does this mean that God wills bad things to happen to us? That God wants us to suffer? I don't think so. Does it mean that God can redeem even the most barren periods of our lives? That our deserts can become holy even as they remain dangerous? Yes. I believe so. But, I also know that while we are in the wilderness it is very hard to imagine redemption.

As many of you know, my youngest son, Christopher, was involved in an auto accident when he was twelve years old. He had broken bones on every limb of his body, but the most severe injury was to his brain ... a traumatic head injury ... and he was in a coma for three weeks. During that time his mother and I lived in the Intensive Care waiting room and one day a good friend came to visit. I had just come out from seeing Christopher and I was sobbing. My friend held me, and then said, "Don't worry ... it will be alright." I know my friend was trying to do his best to comfort me, but the fact of the matter was that right then things were not "alright" ... I had been driven into the wilderness and it was going to be a long time before I would see my way out of it.

I am all too aware of how Christians have suffered under the false teaching that God authors human pain and suffering for some greater good of God's own devising. God does not. But we walk a fine line, nevertheless. Sometimes our journeys with God include dark and desolate places. Not because God takes pleasure in our pain, but because we live in a fragile, broken world that includes deserts, and because God's *modus operandi* is to take the things of death, and wring from them resurrection.

And, our wilderness journeys can sometimes last a long, long time. I've never spent forty days in solitude and silence, much less in a state of physical deprivation and danger, but I can't imagine that Jesus's time in the wilderness passed by quickly. The sense I get from Mark's gospel is that Jesus strove and wrestled. That he experienced each day as a battle of mind, spirit, and body. Maybe the hours stretched into years, and the nights felt endless. Maybe the landscape itself mocked his weary senses, its unvarying bleakness breaking his heart.

For those of us who live in quick-fix cultures, this aspect of the wilderness can be especially trying, because we both tire and despair easily. Why, we ask, is this pain not ending? Why are our prayers going unanswered? Where is God in all this?

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. As I mentioned, 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.

When I look back on my 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. Mark's gospel tells us:

He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him.

My heart is broken by the many who were driven into a wilderness by a young man with an assault weapon. Like my friend who tried to comfort me as my son lay in a coma I feel impotent in face of the horrible pain these people ... our neighbors ... are facing. In spite of that, we can be those angels. Like my friend who held me when I cried we may say the wrong things, but at least we are there ... holding the sorrowful while they cry ... and maybe, just maybe this will be the time that the angels can actually redeem something from this tragedy.

This past week I received an email from a woman I had known 35 years ago. At one time I was a volunteer police chaplain for the Fairfax County Police Department in northern Virginia. One sunny afternoon I was called to a barricade situation. A sixteen year old young man whose parents were divorced had found his father's cache of guns, and had barricaded himself in his bedroom threatening to kill himself. When I arrived, the young man's mother was in the townhouse across the street from her home, which was surrounded by police. As I was holding her ... and the police bullhorn was blaring ... we heard the shot that killed her son.

Immediately the mother was driven into a wilderness. I did what I could to be an "angel," and helped guide her in the months that followed. We eventually lost touch ... until this last week. She had found me by searching the internet. And her story ... after years of living in a barren desert ... is one of redemption ... of resurrection after feeling like her life had been taken away from her. She now works with a suicide prevention organization ... saving lives. Louise was driven into a wilderness. She was there a very long time. She was attended to by angels ... she says that I was one of them. And she returned from her wilderness knowing who she was and who she wanted to be.

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 "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. In the end, Jesus died because of who he chose to be ... a beloved child of God speaking truth to power regardless of the consequences.

As we begin our pilgrimage to Easter we are invited into an intentional journey. In the words of the Ash Wednesday liturgy and the "Invitation to the Observance of a holy Lent" we are called to self-examination and reflection; prayers, fasting and acts of compassion; and reading and 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.

I pray that we'll walk with courage into the deserts we can't choose or avoid. I pray that our long stints in the wilderness will teach us who we really are. And I pray that when angels in all their sweet and secret guises whisper "beloved" into our ears, we will listen, and believe them. If we are to take seriously what Jesus took seriously, then we, too, will speak truth to the powers of our time. Out of our own wilderness experience we can be true angels to those still living in their wilderness.

The family and friends of those victims in Parkland have been thrust into a wilderness. The surviving students and teachers are also in a wilderness, as are many of us who sympathize and empathize with them. It will be a long time before they emerge from their wildernesses. I pray that they have angels that surround them. And I pray, that other angels ... those who take seriously what Jesus took seriously ... and who are willing to speak truth to power ... can also be angels to those who have survived, so that other families will never have to be driven into that wilderness of losing a loved one to a young man with an assault rifle.

Amen.