

**Lent 1  
March 10, 2019**

**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.**

On this First Sunday of Lent we always hear about Jesus in the wilderness being tempted by the devil. Of course, this is by no means the first we have heard of wildernesses in the Bible. Noah was in the wilderness of the landless waters for 40 days. Jacob wrestled with an angel in the wilderness. Moses encountered a burning bush in the wilderness, and the Israelites wandered in the wilderness for 40 years. Later, the prophet Elijah heard a still, small voice in the wilderness. So, what is it about these places where there are no familiar landmarks, no resources, and such solitude, that they become the venue for an encounter with the sacred ... the holy ... the divine presence of God?

I know a little bit about wildernesses ... physical wildernesses and spiritual wildernesses. I've been in wildernesses myself. There is a physical wilderness area in West Virginia where Caren and I once owned a vacation home. The Dolly Sods Wilderness Area is literally designated as a Federal Wilderness Area. The United States Government defines a Federal Wilderness Area as one which is "untrammeled by man, where man himself is a visitor who does not remain." There are no roads in Federal Wilderness Areas, no power lines, and even the trails are unmarked. And, there are 756 Wilderness Areas in the United States. But, I don't think this is the kind of wilderness that Jesus entered.

Like many of you, I've also been in a spiritual wilderness. After my son was injured in an auto accident, my life seemed to dissolve. Christopher was in a coma for a month and a body cast for five months. His traumatic brain injury left him paralyzed on his right side and he had comprehensive and expressive language problems among other things. After managing admissions to twelve rehab hospitals in five states, and visiting him as often as possible, I was physically and emotionally exhausted, I was depressed, and my marriage was strained to its limit. I had most definitely entered a spiritual wilderness.

We do not always choose to enter wilderness areas, especially spiritual wildernesses. In Luke's gospel, from which we read this morning, Jesus is "led" by the Holy Spirit into the wilderness. However, in Mark's gospel the same event is told, but a different Greek verb is used. In Mark's gospel Jesus is "driven" into the wilderness. How many of us, faced with our own significant illness, or the illness of someone we love, feel like we have been driven into a spiritual wilderness? How many parents know the experience of being "led" or "driven" into a wilderness when faced with a child who seems to be out of control, leaving us parents feeling like we have no resources to deal with the problems?

Or, what about that general feeling of living in a world where you can't seem to find your bearings any more, where the old maps of how to live life are well out of date ... isn't that a spiritual wilderness? You may know better than I of the spiritual wilderness into which you have been led or driven by the loss of someone dear to you, or by a family break-up, or by unemployment, or addiction ... your or someone close to you ... and that wilderness of insecurity that accompanies it, or the profound loss of hopes and dreams when the world as you know it changes all too quickly.

Yet, aren't those also the places where we can encounter God ... or at least have the opportunity to encounter God? Aren't these the places where our destiny is found ... the places that call us to discern the direction of our lives? And, if that opportunity exists, how do we respond to this possibility ... this opportunity that is scary, threatening, and feels so much like wilderness? Very few people want to spend a long time in a wilderness ... spiritual or otherwise. So, how do we encounter the holy ... the sacred ... the divine presence of God while we are there?

In this story from Luke, the devil offers Jesus three opportunities to walk away from wilderness. As I reflect on each of them, I wonder how they might become invitations for us ... invitations to trust God's love in the barren places of our own lives.

The first temptation targets Jesus's hunger. "If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread." The temptation implies that God's beloved should not hunger. By inviting Jesus to magically feed his hunger, the devil invites Jesus to deny the reality of being human. The devil encourages Jesus to disrespect and manipulate creation for his own satisfaction. To supernaturally turn what is not meant to be eaten ... a stone ... into an object he can exploit.

"The Invitation to the Observance of a holy Lent" that we read on Ash Wednesday includes the phrase, "by prayer, fasting, and self-denial." So, many of us have "given up" something for Lent this year ... chocolate, wine, TV, Facebook. The goal is to sit with our hungers, our wants, our desires ... and learn what they have to teach us. However, the real question is, "what is the hunger beneath the hunger?" Can we hunger and still live? Desire and still flourish? Lack and still live generously, without exploiting the beauty and abundance all around us? Who and where is God when we are famished for whatever it is we long for? Especially for that which feeds the soul ... for friendship, meaning, and intimacy?

I think what this is telling us is that hunger in and of itself is not a virtue ... rather it is a classroom. To sit patiently with a yearning, a desire, a craving ... to become its student ... and still embrace my identity as God's beloved, is hard. It's very, very hard. Yet I believe this is the invitation. We can be loved and hungry at the same time. We can hope and hurt at the same time. Most of all, we can trust that when God nourishes us, it won't be by magic. It won't be manipulative and disrespectful. Although it may not necessarily be the food we'd choose for ourselves, it will feed us, nevertheless.

The second temptation of Jesus in the wilderness targets his ego. After showing Jesus “all the kingdoms of the world,” the devil promises him glory and authority. “It will all be yours,” the devil says. Fame ... visibility ... recognition ... clout. A kingdom to end all kingdoms, here and now. The temptation is that God’s beloved does not have to live in obscurity. The implication is that to be God’s child is to be center stage ... to be visible, applauded, admired, and envied. The implication of this temptation is that a God who really loves us will never “abandon” us to a modest life, lived in what the world considers insignificance.

That Christians tend to have an uneasy relationship with power is an understatement. Church history is littered with the ugly fallout of “Christian” ambition, power, fame, and authority gone awry. So, the question for us is whether we can embrace Jesus’s version of significance, a significance borne of humility and surrender. How important is it to us that we’re noticed ... praised ... liked? Is our belief in God’s love for us contingent on a definition of success ... a definition that doesn’t come from God at all? Can we trust that God sees us even when the powers-that-be do not? Can our lives as beloved children of God thrive in quiet places ... in secret places ... in humble places?

The uncomfortable truth about authentic power for us who take seriously what Jesus took seriously is that that authentic power resides in weakness.

The third temptation targets Jesus’ vulnerability. “[God] will command his angels concerning you, to protect you,” the devil promises Jesus. “On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.” (This is a quote from the Psalm we read this morning (ps. 91)) The implication of this temptation is that if we are beloved children of God, then God will keep us safe. Safe from physical and emotional harm, safe from frailty and disease, safe from accidents, safe from death.

It’s such an enticing lie, because it targets our deepest fears about what it means to be human in a broken, dangerous world. We want so much to believe that we can leverage our status as a beloved child of God into an impenetrable shield. That we can get God to guarantee us swift and perfect rescues if we just believe hard enough. But no ... it doesn’t work that way. If the Jesus’ death on the cross teaches us anything, it teaches us that God’s precious children still bleed, still ache, still die. We are loved in our vulnerability ... not out of it.

Three temptations. Three invitations. What will we do with them?

If those forty days in the Jesus’ wilderness experience was a time of self-creation, a time for Jesus to decide who he was and how he would live out his calling, then here is what he chose: emptiness over fullness ... obscurity over honor ... vulnerability over rescue. At every instance when Jesus could have reached for the magical, the glorious, and the safe, he reached instead for the mundane, the invisible, and the risky.

The Gospel tells us that Jesus didn’t choose to enter the wilderness ... the Spirit led him there. But here’s the kicker ... Jesus chose to stay until the work of the wilderness was over.

We don't always choose to enter wildernesses, either. We don't volunteer for pain, loss, danger, or terror. But the wilderness happens. Whether it comes to us in the guise of a hospital waiting room, a thorny relationship, a troubled child, an addiction, or a sudden death, the wilderness appears, unbidden and unwelcome, at our doorsteps. It insists on itself. And sometimes it is God's own Spirit that drives us into that parched and barren landscape.

Does this mean that God wills bad things to happen to us? That he wants us to suffer? I don't think so. Does it mean that God can redeem even the most barren periods of our lives, if we choose to stay and pay attention? Does it mean that our deserts can become holy even as they remain dangerous? Yes ... I believe so ... I know so..

I believe to encounter the holy, sacred and divine presence of God, we have to trust God. Above all we have to trust God. Noah trusted God. Jacob trusted God. Moses, in spite of his self-doubts, trusted God. The Israelites, in spite of their many protest and many waverings, trusted God. And Jesus trusted God in the wilderness.

And remember, it does no good to complain about how you got into the wilderness. Finding fault with yourself or others for the place you are in isn't going to show you the direction out of the wilderness. Remember, this wilderness has the potential of bringing an encounter with the holy ... with the divine presence of God. Turn your face to God and trust.

In this season of preparation for the Easter moment we are invited into a Lenten wilderness as a means to encounter the holy in our lives and the world around us. We can avoid the fear of the wilderness by remaining with that which is known and familiar ... the status quo. Or, we can let go of that "civilization" to enter a place that just might surprise us. Yes, we may get lost ... but trust God ... God is always there. Don't get stuck ... keep seeking new resources ... forage if you will. And keep you heart and soul open to seeing God in unexpected places. Remember ... in the words from the Invitation to the Observance of a holy Lent from our Ash Wednesday ... this is a time for "self examination and reflection; prayer, fasting, and self-denial; and by reading and meditating on God's holy Word." Your encounter with the sacred ... the holy ... the divine presence of God ... just might open a new path.

Amen.