

**1 Lent
March 6, 2022**

**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 Ash Wednesday I preached about original blessings ... that we were made in goodness ... for goodness. We then moved to the Invitation to a Holy Lent, and the imposition of ashes ... *Remember you are dust, and to dust you will return.* These were the challenging words we heard as we began our Lenten journeys and they invite us to face a bewildering paradox ... we are beloved of God ... were made in goodness ... and we were made for goodness ... and we will die. The first truth does not prevent the second. The second truth does not negate the first.

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?

After two years of a global pandemic that has taken nearly six million lives worldwide, we've had ample opportunity to witness lives ... beautiful, singular, and robust human lives ... crumbling to dust and ashes as we found ourselves in a wilderness. This week, as our brothers and sisters in Ukraine and Russia face the terrors and losses of war, we are once again asked to consider what it means that we ... all of us, regardless of where we live or what political views we embrace ... what it means that we are small, mortal, vulnerable, and defenseless.

In many ways, this is the same reality Jesus wrestled with in our Gospel reading this morning. At his baptism, Jesus heard the truth about his identity ... he is God's Son ... God's beloved. Nevertheless, when the Spirit led him into the wilderness, he had to face a series of powerful assaults on that truth. He had to learn how to discern God's presence in a bleak and lonely wasteland. He had to trust that he could be beloved *and* famished ... valued *and* vulnerable at the same time. He had to learn that God's care resided *within* his flesh-and-blood humanity ... within a fragile vessel that could crack and shatter. To be beloved is not to transcend the other profound truth ... the truth of dust and ashes. The fact is, we will die.

We do not always choose to enter wilderness areas, especially spiritual wildernesses. In Luke's gospel, 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 ... yours 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. Could it be that the wilderness is a place where we can get an unobstructed view of both our past and our future? 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. Because it’s one thing to trust God in retrospect, when our hardships are over. It is quite another to trust God in the moment, when the comforts and certainties we cling to burn to ash.

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. In the devil’s economy, unmet desire is an unnecessary aberration, not an integral part of what it means to be human. By inviting Jesus to magically satisfy his hunger, the devil invited Jesus to deny the reality of being human. To “cheat” his way to satisfaction, instead of waiting, paying attention to his hunger, and relying upon God. Along the way, the devil encourages Jesus to disrespect and manipulate creation for his own satisfaction. To 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, for many people “self-denial” means giving up something that is a part of their lives ... for some it is something simple like chocolate, wine, TV, Facebook. However, what if the goal of self-denial is to sit with our hungers ... our wants ... our desires ... our cravings ... and learn what they have to teach us. Then, the real question is, “what is the hunger beneath the hunger?” Can we hunger and still live? Can we desire and still flourish? Can we 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? Can we live in God's presence with delayed gratification instead of immediate relief?

I think what this is telling us is that hunger in and of itself is not a virtue ... rather it is there to teach us something. To sit patiently with a yearning, a desire, a craving ... to become its student ... and still embrace our 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 Jesus glory and authority. "It will all be yours," the devil says. Fame ... visibility ... recognition ... power. 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 of this temptation 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 and humility.

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 ... born in goodness for goodness ... that we can leverage that status into an impenetrable shield. That we can get God to guarantee us swift and perfect rescues if we just believe hard enough ... if we just have sufficient faith. However, 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. We are the children of a God who accompanies us in our suffering, not a God who guarantees us a lifetime of immunity. Why is this good news? It is good news because we are also the children of a God who resurrects. The story of humanity is not a story that ends in despair. It's a story that culminates at an empty tomb, in a kingdom of hope, healing, consolation, and joy.

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 nevertheless. 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. 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 your 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.