

Sermon: The Blessing of the Wilderness
1 Lent, Year A
Matthew 4:1-11

Shelby Ochs Owen
Emmanuel, Staunton
March 5, 2017

This morning we have hiked out into the wilderness with Jesus in our Gospel passage. What comes to mind when you think of the wilderness? Is it a desolate place, a place with wild animals, a lack of resources, food, water and shelter? A place where one can easily come to harm? Feel threatened?

The wilderness in Scripture is a place of struggle. The Israelites struggled big time after they left slavery in Egypt, crossed the Red Sea into so-called freedom. In their struggle, they complained that they would rather go back to slavery in Egypt where they at least had cucumbers and melons to eat rather than wander around in that inhospitable desert! The wilderness was not an easy place for them to be. They cried for food and water and God delivered to them what they needed. In today's passage, Jesus, who has just been baptized, was very likely on a spiritual high has now been led into the wilderness. While this story appears in Mark and Luke, only Matthew says that it was the Spirit that led Jesus to this place, suggesting that there is a divine purpose in the temptations that Jesus would face.

After forty days of fasting Jesus is faced with the devil, also known as the tempter or tester, *Diallo* in Greek, which means one who throws over or across. "One who attacks, misleads, deceives, diverts, discredits, or slanders." (Feasting on the Word, Year A, Vol. 2, p.47, Robert Bryant) Here the devil aims to mislead Jesus, from his identity as God's Son and his divine purpose. Jesus has not eaten anything for a long time, and he is hungry! In this vulnerable state, Jesus faces the Tempter head on. In an intentional confrontation with evil, three times Jesus faces temptation, first with turning stones into bread. (Some of us couldn't make it from breakfast to dinner without succumbing to that temptation if it were offered to us), then being brought up high on a pinnacle of the Temple being tempted to prove his sonship by jumping off so that God would save him ...and then the temptation for glory if he were only to worship the devil. All of the temptations were about mis-using power to secure...

Temptations come in a variety of forms. There is a sign on a bridge that crosses a little river farther up in the valley, that says, "Do not jump off this bridge." While I never would have dreamed of jumping off that bridge before I saw the sign, the sign kind of makes me want to!" Temptations come in obvious ways: eating too much or eating the wrong things, drinking too much,; we can be tempted to stay too busy, to focus too much on our material wealth, to collect too many things, to shop too much, we can certainly be tempted to watch too much news, spend too much time on social media. Some of these are so obvious or familiar we may hesitate to even take them very seriously but there are other temptations that we may not have yet considered, such as the temptation to only associate with people who are like us, perhaps in skin color, in educational background or in political or religious preferences. For some of us we are tempted to hold on to our anger or are tempted not to forgive others. And in the process we forget some of the more important things such as actually caring for ourselves, caring for the poor in our midst, giving a voice to the voiceless, such as those who

are oppressed and focusing on God. Augustine defined sin as an inordinate desire for something good. Temptations come to us in myriad ways forms but one common theme they seem to have in succumbing to them, they make us less than we are called to be. They lay bare our deepest passions and loyalty”

We all have periods in the wilderness. Wilderness can look very different for each of us. For some it is being caught up in a drug or alcohol addiction, for others it is being in the throes of depression, for some it is in a loneliness or a bitter disappointment when life has not gone the way we had planned or had hoped. Wilderness is real for all of us. And while there are indeed struggles that happen there, amazing and beautiful blessings can also take place in that Holy Struggle. Some of our forbears such as Theodore Roosevelt, John Muir and others had the wisdom and the wherewithal to champion for areas of wilderness to be set aside for our country. We actually need wilderness in our lives to fully be ourselves, to know where our deepest passions and loyalties lie. Author Nancy Wynne Newhall writes, “The Wilderness holds answers to questions that we have not yet learned to ask.”

The Israelites needed the Wilderness to fully become the people of God. Their time in the desert was instructive. This is where much of their formation took place, where they learned to depend on God. This is where they realized their full identity was totally enmeshed with the life of God. Perhaps Jesus also needed the wilderness, where he could face these temptations to clarify his mission, which was to serve, and to clarify his Sonship. Jesus’ power was a self giving power of love which enabled him to more fully focus on giving his life for us.

During Lent the lectionary takes us to the Wilderness with Jesus for a reason. I wonder if the Wilderness is a gift to us, a place where we can take a serious look at our own temptations that keep us from being our full loving selves. You know, Jesus is in the Wilderness with us. Just as God never left Jesus alone, God will not leave us to face our troubles, our temptations alone. Might our periods of wilderness be blessed places full of questions that have yet to be answered, full of mystery and wonder, as we consider God’s presence there with us? Might we see the temptations we face as distractions to our mission which is to more fully love God and each other? Jesus came through each temptation through a complete reliance on God. And maybe we need to not be surprised that we actually need God’s help to overcome our temptations.

This Lent our theme is Learning to Love. Could we pray that God will first of all teach us what temptations each of us has that keep us from the love of God, that keep us from living into our full potential. And then may we ask God’s help. In fact let us pray the collect of today you will find in your bulletin together:

Almighty God, whose blessed Son was led by the Spirit to be tempted by Satan: Come quickly to help us who are assaulted by many temptations; and as you know the weaknesses of each of us, let each one find you mighty to save; through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen