

Ah Wilderness!

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Good Shepherd Church, 2/ 21/ 10, Lent I

Deut. 26:1-11, Romans 10:8b-13, Luke 4:1-13

The first thing that strikes me about our Gospel passage this is what can only be called Jesus' relationship with the devil. His responses are surprisingly calm and civil. He does not run away, he does not refuse to engage, he does not try to kill or destroy the devil. He even goes along with the devil to several locations—“up” (presumably to the holy mountain as it says in the Gospel of Matthew) and to the pinnacle of the temple in Jerusalem. And he listens to the devil, hears him out, and then starkly tells the devil the truth as he sees it, quoting scripture in every case. Even in this early wilderness experience, Jesus shows uncanny calm and uncanny courage. Jesus, unlike most Episcopal priests, according to a recent survey, was not conflict adverse.

But in the teachings about Jesus, the courageous and the assertive nature of this truth-telling is nearly always down-played. The story of Jesus' over-turning the tables in the temple is often cast as something out of character for Jesus. But it is absolutely in character.

Jesus is the one who, at twelve years of age, went missing for three days. When his mother and father finally found him, and burst into the temple, Jesus said to his distraught and probably furious mother, “Why were you searching for me? Didn't you know I must be in my father's house?” For the next 20 years of Jesus' life, we read nothing about him in any of the gospels. One theory I have heard is that that was because Jesus was grounded for all that time. Jesus later called his best friend Peter the devil, he basically called the Syrophoenician woman a dog, and he very clearly said, “I have come not to bring peace to the world, but a sword” (Mt 10:34). Jesus was a powerful and fearless truth-telling person.

And so, inspired by Jesus, I am going to tell you the truth. You and I are each embarking on a bit of a wilderness trek, not of our making. In your case, you are experiencing the loss of a beloved interim vicar, being asked to get used to the idea of sharing a vicar with another congregation, having to get used to a new priest-in-charge that you don't know AT ALL yet, and changing a service time that has been the same for oh, 130 years or so.

For my part, I have been on a wilderness trek as well. And I have been questioning God about the inconvenient timing of my particular trek, with no understanding until just lately. On Nov. 15 I was called to Holy Trinity Richmond, which has been a rich and wonderful experience. On Dec. 30, the woman who has been my best friend since I was thirteen years old died after a long illness. Two weeks later I was called to Good Shepherd Church, and even in a grieving state, I have been so happy to meet and begin to know some of you, and so glad to be at this beautiful parish. It finally occurred to me that perhaps I had to begin this ministry with a broken heart in order to pastor two congregations in the midst of difficult change, in order to walk this wilderness walk with you.

Of course many of us may have had our hearts broken time and again, by things more powerful than changes in service time and liturgical leadership. We may resonate not only with wandering in the wilderness of temptation as in our New Testament story of today, but with many Old Testament stories as well. We may have been barely created before we visited violence, whether physical or psychological on our brethren or sistren- or they may have visited it upon us. We may have experienced slavery, either to a person or to a substance. We may have been exiled from a beloved relationship, or job or home. We may even have lost a child, an experience as close to crucifixion as any of us are likely to get.

And out of this damage, we may well have mistaken things for our bread that were not our bread. We may have grasped at kingdoms and glory, when we were just so very famished for something real. We may have metaphorically flung ourselves from high places.

In the opening of our liturgy today, we are urged to work our way through the wilderness of our past and our present in the observance of a holy Lent. We are advised to do this with self-examination and repentance, prayer, self-denial and reading and meditating on God's holy Word. These practices, it seems to me, ultimately help allow God the room for God's work- the healing of broken hearts, ours and those of others in our lives.

The liturgy goes on to say that Lent is a time for those who have felt separated from the body of the faithful, separated from God, for whatever reason, to be reconciled and forgiven. I saw a sign on a banner at St. Augustine's church last Saturday. It said, "If God is not with you, guess who moved?" So we are encouraged in Lent, if we have moved away, to find a way back home.

Lent is not only a season when we seek forgiveness, but also a season when we seek to forgive. In the short and sweet book, "Have a Little Faith," I read of a Rabbi who told a young writer about a Jewish teaching that on the last day of your life, you must have forgiven everyone who ever did you wrong. The young man thought for a moment and then said, "How will I know what is the last day of my life?" the rabbi said, "Exactly." But if there is someone you cannot bring yourself to forgive, try doing what Jesus did from the cross; ask God to forgive them instead.

We are urged to read and meditate on God's holy word during the season of Lent. But the scriptural phrase that may be most helpful in our time of self-

examination in the wilderness and in our struggles with change was said by Jesus and by angels many times. “Do not be afraid.”

To take time each and day for prayer and meditation in these incredibly busy times may seem like a very tall order. But maybe just for Lent we are urged to try. A Buddhist saying I have heard goes, “Thirty minutes of meditation a day is required, unless you are very busy. Then a full hour is necessary.” Particularly in times of transition, we are told to, as scripture would have it, “Go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father (or mother) who is in secret; and your Father (or mother) who sees in secret will reward you.” (Mt 6:6)

The good news, the hope and the glory, is that if we are not afraid to use them, we are given the strength, the heart, and the choice to walk through our shared wilderness and emerge together into the light of the Spirit, which always leads us.