

First Sunday in Lent

Year C

Deuteronomy 26:1-11

Romans 10:8b-13

Luke 4:1-13

Psalm 91:1-2, 9-16

“To uproot sin and the evil that is so imbedded in our sinning can be done only by divine power, for it is impossible and outside man's competence (ability) to uproot sin. To struggle, yes, to continue to fight, to inflict blows, and to receive setbacks is in your power. To uproot, however, belongs to God alone. If you could have done it on your own, what would have been the need for the coming of the Lord?”

This quote is attributed to St. Macarius, also known as the Lamp of the Desert. He lived in the 4th century, but like any ancient writings, it is still fitting for us today as we begin our yearly pilgrimage to Jerusalem. The desert mothers and fathers, in the 3rd and 4th centuries, purposely traveled to the wilderness. Eventually becoming the model for monasticism, these faithful communities

searched out and knew God through contemplative prayer and silence, through withdrawal from society, and through scripture and practicing the teachings of Christ. Instead of depleting them, their desert experiences lifted them up- connected them closer to God.

Even with examples of positive wilderness experiences in our tradition and history of Christianity, we often judge wilderness experiences as bad, barren, tests, full of hardships and challenges. The word wandering comes to mind. We especially judge them so as they seem to sneak up on us. When we find ourselves in the wilderness, we are often bewildered, how did we get here? Such are the paradoxes of faith- how at different times in our lives, words and experiences like the term wilderness can have dramatically different meanings and evoke a spectrum of emotions.

How about the season of Lent this year for you? A time that often draws us into desert wilderness- simplicity, contemplation, fasting. A time to strip away all that pushes us far from God. In a number of conversations in this place, not many of us were ready for Lent nor prepared for what was to come. Maybe it was the weather, maybe the early date of Ash Wednesday. But it just didn't feel like Lent should be here quite yet.

But are we ever ready for the wilderness times in our lives? The Israelites, in their Exodus, pushed into the wilderness in the night. Jesus was whisked away

into the desert immediately following his baptism. Forty days. Forty years. Were either one of them ready for what was about to happen?

Thinking about preparedness, survival shows like *Man vs. Wild* with Bear Grylls are extremely trendy now. In particular, shows in which they focus on the desert bring large viewership. What is it about the desert that we're drawn to? In a way, it's easy to see why it gets its bad rap: Barren, harsh environment. Almost impossible to survive. Little to eat. Scarce to no water to drink. No shelter. The burning sun. But if you're familiar with these shows, is that they always show you that if you know how to read the signs, you can make it. How to find shelter and water- which unsuspecting plants and reptiles can serve as hydration and food. And not just make it, but thrive.

According to scholars, Luke uses the name of Satan to mean the personification of evil, a being who sums up opposition to all the good that comes in Jesus.

Something that counters and goes directly against the mission of Jesus- the redemptive aim of God.¹ It appears Jesus knew this in his interaction with the Power of Death. In his interaction with Temptation.

Jesus knew how to read the signs. Only God has the power to uproot and Jesus was filled with the Holy Spirit and prepared for his wilderness time by his baptism. He understood and acknowledged what his opposition was trying to do. And by reading the signs, that of scripture, and in fasting, with the foundation of the Holy Spirit, the divine power won in the desert. Jesus knew the scripture his opposition was using, and countered back. Where he not only survived, but thrived. His victory in the desert alerted us and his disciples to his identity and divinity. Even more so, Jesus models for us how to act in the wilderness- what it means to choose God and be faithful.

Lent gets that same bad reputation as the wilderness and desert does. Mostly in regards to the consequences of our reflections: when we truly look at our human choices, sins, our negligence. When we're asked to go away to the wilderness to remove all distractions, to search ourselves, very often we find those negative things we care not to find. But in the wilderness, both physically and metaphorically, like Jesus, like the desert fathers and mothers, we find that as we

¹ Fitzmeyer.

identify these aspects, so too we identify God with us, uprooting all that is within us that is a barrier to love, peace, and hope.

The condition of sin and suffering continues though. Jesus hasn't yet returned. And just because we thrive in one wilderness period, doesn't mean another won't ever happen. There is an alarming murkiness as Luke draws to a close this wilderness event. Satan withdrew until an opportune time, he says. Knowing how it all ends, we know that even though the Israelites arrived in the Promise Land (today we heard Moses' final words to them), even though they arrived, they endured more hardships in the Promised Land. And Jesus himself endured challenges and opposition even to his death on the cross. How do we live in hope, and not fear that our adversary lurks in the night, always looking for the opportune time? I'm sure by now you have your strategies. One way is to change our framework in our mind of what a wilderness time can look like and be like. Another is to just hunker down and make it through. Yet another is to reach out to community. If we look to Jesus he leaned on prayer, on scripture, on the Holy Spirit. While it looks different for each of us, we can use this Lenten time to reexamine those if we choose. Whatever it may look like, may Jesus be present this Lent with all of us, in prayer and supplication, in wilderness time, and in the resurrection from the tomb, and give us that answer.