

Sermon on the Wilderness, Lent 1, March 6, 2022

Jesus has just been baptised and has had that amazing experience of having the Holy Spirit come and rest upon him like a dove. And the voice of God speaking from the heavens: "This is my son, my beloved. With him I am well pleased." And then the Spirit leads him out into the wilderness for 40 days of prayer and fasting. We always read this at the beginning of Lent, because that's where the 40 days of Lent comes from. And because it helps us shape our own Lenten practice.

Jesus had to get away by himself on a retreat so he could pray and consider what this meant. What did it mean to be the Son of God? What did God require of his son? Jesus wasn't born knowing this stuff. Like every other human being, if he wanted to know these things, he had to figure them out. And whenever Jesus had anything to figure out, he always went to God for help. Usually off by himself in the wilderness.

Throughout Scripture the wilderness is the place where we meet God. Abraham meets God in the desert. When Hagar is driven out, she meets God in the wilderness. When Jacob runs away from home, both times, he meets God en route through the wilderness. Moses, wandering with the sheep in the Wilderness of Sinai comes on the burning bush. The Israelites enter the wilderness and meet God on Mt. Sinai and, in fact, God leads them in the fiery pillar as they wander in the wilderness 40 years. Elijah, fleeing from Queen Jezebel, finds God in the wilderness. And Jesus goes there to meet God. This seemingly empty place turns out to be filled with God's Spirit.

As Jesus is thinking and exploring what it might mean to be the Son of God, some tempting ideas arise. Perhaps he can use his powers to benefit himself. Not at anyone's expense, but just, you know, turn this rock into a nice loaf of bread. When I was a teenager I used to hear sermons that actually promoted this idea. It's called the prosperity gospel. This is how the reasoning went. God is your Father in heaven. So you are a child of God. God is the king of the world. So you are a king's kid. So you are entitled to live like a king's kid. You have the right to claim stuff from God: a new Cadillac, eg, or a fancy home. God loves you. God will provide these nice luxuries for you if you only ask (with enough faith). Jesus rejects this line of thought. "No," he says. "We do not live by bread alone." Or by Cadillacs either. Whatever else being the Son of God may mean, it doesn't mean feathering your own nest.

Then he gets to thinking of all the good things he could do if he was in charge of the world. Ever do that? It's tempting when you see some of the silly decisions some people make. He could make good laws and protect the poor. And, you know, if he has to use some slightly devilish means to get to rule the whole world, well, the end justifies the means, doesn't it? It's OK to bomb a whole lot of innocent civilians so that I can protect my own people and get rid of a government that I think is corrupt. Isn't it? After all, I would bring peace and goodness to that country. They'd be happier in the long run with me running things. Wouldn't they? Jesus also rejects this. It is not OK to worship the devil to obtain worldly power. The end does not justify the means. The means also have to be godly or they will corrupt the end, too. And you, while they're at it. We must worship God alone.

The third temptation is trickier. Even the devil can quote Scripture. "Look, the Scripture says God will look after you. Why not do something really glitzy to win followers. They'd know you were God's Son if God had to more or less leap to your bidding. You can almost control God that way, force God's hand to look after you by jumping off the Temple. That would be really impressive. Everyone would know you were someone special then." Or "look, you can ignore Covid protocols and not wear masks and hug everyone in church and since God will protect you, everyone will know your faith is true." But Jesus rejects this line of thought, too. "You shall not put the Lord your God to the test," he says. God does not show up for our tests. God does not jump through hoops when we tell him to. Ever.

In the end, Jesus realises that being the Son of God means that he must fully entrust himself to God, must fully obey God, must act always as God would act, even if it costs him. Even if it means going without some stuff. Even if it means confronting evil powers with truth and love, not with an army. Even if it means forgiving his enemies from the cross. Even if it means dying. It means he is God's ambassador to us and must show us the same amount of unconditional love that God shows us. It means winning hearts and souls with love, not gimmicks. It may mean letting some people run away from you. In other words, it's no bed of roses.

It is in the wilderness that Jesus is formed as God's Son. It is in the wilderness that his vision becomes clear. It was also in the wilderness that the children of Israel were shaped as God's people. When they were released from slavery and escaped via the Red Sea, they were a motley crew of people who tended to whine about their problems but had no idea how to live or make decisions or anything. God spent the 40 years in the wilderness caring for them and shaping them and teaching them so that they would know him and know how they should live together as God's people. Now, this didn't always take, in their case, especially when they got to better times in the Promised Land. But that was what the training and testing time in the wilderness was for.

So I have said before that this Covid time, 2 years of constant alarm and lockdowns and opening and more lockdowns and uncertainty and so on, were kind of like a wilderness time for us. We couldn't plan too much for the future. We looked forward to the Promised Land of some sort of normalcy, but we don't really know exactly what it will look like or anything. Like people in the wilderness, we have been living day to day, without being able to plan much, just trying to keep our basic needs met and keep out of harm's way.

And now our government is telling us that this time is nearly over. They plan to lift all restrictions (even though they're still recommending we take some) in 2 weeks time. Or if things change, it might be a little longer. Soon anyway. And again, we are in confusion and don't know what this will mean for us. It's our Promised Land, but we don't know what it will be like. We'll need time to explore it.

We don't know what the church should do or what it will look like after that. Will we still wear masks? Distance? Go back to hugging? Or not? And if so, how soon? Will all the people who used to come all the time and haven't come for a while come back? Or not? How can we still include them? How should we reach out to our changed community? And, by the way, who are we now? What does it mean to be a church in this post-Covid-restrictions world we will soon be entering?

Well, we have now been given the gift of Lent. We have 40 days when we normally devote extra time to prayer and reflection, self-examination, penitence and so on. This is kind of like the Israelites. After 40 years of wandering in the wilderness they came to the Jordan River and before crossing over into the Promised Land they paused and spent time taking stock and reviewing the law and so on. As I said on Ash Wednesday, Lent is related to lengthening days in Spring and is to be a time of growth, of new life. It is a time for us to take stock of our lives and see where we've gone off the rails and how we might get back on. To seek to restore our relationships with God and one another. You will all be doing this at a personal level, of course (see my Ash Wednesday sermon for some ideas of what this might look like).

I would like to call you to pray also for the church. Spend a few minutes in your daily prayers praying for direction for the church. How shall we move forward out of this wilderness into this promised land? Who is God calling us to be and what is God calling us to do, here in Spryfield, in this time? What does it mean to be the Church of God anyway? Jesus had to figure out what it meant to be the Son of God. The children of Israel needed to learn what it meant to be the people of God. Pray that we may see more clearly what it means to be the church of God, here and now.

And we should ask ourselves what are the temptations we face in this time and place? The temptation of trying to recapture the past? Just to forget these last two years and go back to how things were? The temptation of feeling helpless or powerless? The temptation to cave in to our fear? The temptation to be rash? I don't know. But please pray about it. Ask God to show us where we should be going, who God is calling us to be and what God is calling us to do, and how he's calling us to do it. And to see the things that might get in our way and prevent us.

Lent is a heaven-sent time to take stock, to think and pray and reflect. It is the perfect time to change our lives into more healthy, more godly, patterns. Our personal lives and the church's life. Pray about these things. Because I don't think life for any of us or for the church is going to be exactly what it was. I think it will be better, if we use this opportunity to pay attention to the nudges of the Holy Spirit, as Jesus did. Jesus did not go back to his carpenter's bench after his wilderness time. The children of Israel did not go back to slavery. We have been changed and shaped, are still being shaped, by our experiences and by God's Spirit working within us in response to these.

Let us be open this Lent to the leading of the Holy Spirit. Let us follow trustingly out of this Covid wilderness and let the Spirit work her changes in us, show us where we should go and who we should now be. I invite you to keep a holy Lent, by self-examination,

penitence, prayer, fasting and almsgiving and reading and meditating on the word of God.
And may God guide us to the Promised Land beyond the wilderness.