

## Sermon for Lent 1, Wilderness, February 18, 2024

On the first Sunday of Lent we always read one of the stories in the gospels about Jesus' temptation in the wilderness. Mark's version, that we read this morning, doesn't give us the story of the 3 temptations but it does give us the context for this whole event, which I want to talk about today. Jesus spent 40 days fasting and praying in the wilderness. And when we say 40 days, some of the first connections are the 40 days and 40 nights of rain that caused the flood in the story of Noah. And the 40 years spent wandering in the wilderness by the Children of Israel, after they escaped from Egypt and before they got to the Promised Land. And of course, the 40 days of Lent. So let's look at this.

Jesus makes the trip from his home town of Nazareth to the Jordan where John the Baptist is, and he is baptised by John. And just as he's coming up out of the water, the heavens are torn open and the Spirit, in the form of a dove, descends on Jesus and rests on him, and a voice from heaven says, "You are my Son, my beloved, with you I am well pleased." And then the Spirit immediately drives him into the wilderness where he spends 40 days fasting and praying and wrestling with various temptations. And at the end of that time, he comes out and he knows what his purpose is and he knows how to live it out. He starts to proclaim the Good News: "The time is fulfilled and the Kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe in the good news."

Jesus has just had this wonderful, affirming experience. He is baptised by John, committing himself to following God once again, having a fresh start. He has the Holy Spirit descend upon him, which is amazing. And the affirmation by God that God loves him and is very pleased with him. So uplifting. So fulfilling. Such a wonderful experience. And immediately, before he's even had time to throw a party or even think about it, the Spirit has sent him off to the wilderness for some intensive training and discernment.

Jesus has to figure out just what it means to be the Son of God. What is he supposed to do? How is he supposed to do it? I've spoken before about the temptation Matthew and Luke tell us about, the temptation to assume the good news and our position as God's children, is all about us, fulfilling our desires; the temptation to make it all about how amazing we are; the temptation to lord it over other people. And we know Jesus rejects all of these and when he comes out of the desert, he knows who he is and what is required of him. He knows he is there to serve and not to be served, to heal, to preach, to stir people up and comfort them, to forgive, and to offer himself in love to humanity at whatever cost. And also to keep in touch with God by constant prayer so he can actually follow through on this.

The Hebrew people had a similar experience. They are liberated from the oppression of Pharaoh, brought miraculously through the Red Sea, their enemies are destroyed, and they reach Mt. Sinai, after being given miraculous food and drink, and they see God with their own eyes on the holy mountain and they enter into a covenant where God will be their God and they will be God's people. Totally amazing experience. And then they need to spend 40 years in the wilderness, finding out what it means to be God's people. And being trained and formed as God's people. And only after that do they enter the Promised Land.

This time of training in the wilderness, forming in the wilderness, is something that happens in the lives of Christians, too, in a figurative way. We don't have to actually go wandering in a desert, but it feels that way. Saints throughout history have spoken of this wilderness time, or the Dark Night of the Soul. Times when we feel lost, alone, not sure where we belong or where we're going. Often the feeling of God's presence is withdrawn at that time and we start questioning everything. The questions of Who am I? What am I to do with my life? arise for us.

I have spoken with lots of people, young and old, who have experienced this. Some of you have, I know. Young people, happy in their faith, who suddenly lose that comforting feeling and think they've lost their faith. Older people, finished their jobs, wondering what is left for them in life. And sometimes feeling abandoned by God. I always say to them that this will happen sometimes, to the most faithful of Christians. It is a normal thing and in fact, you haven't lost your faith at all. If you had, you wouldn't care about any of this. You are just in a wilderness time. And it will pass.

But I believe that these wilderness times are brought to us by the Holy Spirit. We know that Jesus' time in the desert was initiated by the Spirit who drove him into the wilderness. And I believe that God gives us these difficult, trying, challenging times as a gift. They are a gift because we are ready for more. We are ready to grow. We are ready to be challenged to deeper faith and also to see in what direction God is now wanting to lead us. And they are a gift because these are times when we are prepared and trained for the new roles God is giving us. Or has given us. They often, but not always, follow some exalted type experience like Jesus' baptism or seeing God on Mt. Sinai. And then, wham! There we are wandering in the wilderness, wondering what that means for us.

And frankly, I don't think any of us would bother to grow or go more deeply if we didn't have these. I know I wouldn't. Because when everything is going well for us and we feel contented, close to God, there is very little motivation to move on. Why would we bother to examine ourselves closely when we're having such a good time? Why would we bother to go through the painful experience of weeding out the stuff that is no longer useful to us, the attitudes and behaviours that are holding us back, when we're happy the way we are?

We human beings are very much inclined to pitch our camps in the first lovely looking place and then just stay there. If we're climbing a mountain, we're likely to stop at the first plateau, and just stay there. Stay in our nice, comfortable ruts without even asking if there might be a better place. But from time to time, God calls us to move on. This is because God wants more for us. God knows that the view from the top is even better. God knows that we are at our happiest and most fulfilled when we don't stagnate. God knows that when we stop growing we're likely to start dying. So God disrupts us and makes us move on, makes us grow in our spiritual lives.

I have had this experience countless times in my life. I've told you a number of times about my call to the priesthood. Well, I had that sense of God's calling and it was affirmed by the bishop and my church and my friends and various clergy. Great!

So I went off to AST to study and prepare myself. I was feeling pretty great. I knew I had a lot to offer. I already had quite a lot of Bible knowledge and theological knowledge. I had a lot of experience in church leadership. I had been married to a priest for 30 years. I figured I would coast. And for the first year, I pretty much did. I had a great time.

Then that first summer, I took CPE, the chaplaincy training, and that involves looking at our own hang-ups. You know, the ones I thought I'd dealt with years ago? Only as it turned out, I hadn't. So I was plunged into that whole thing and forced to go much deeper than was at all comfortable. I was forced to start thinking about what it actually means to be a priest. Not all beer and skittles. For the next couple years I was in a major wilderness time of trying to figure out who I was. I was called by God to be a priest, but what did that mean? I was asking the same sorts of questions that Jesus was asking and the children of Israel were asking. I had been driven into the wilderness by the Spirit and was being kept there till she felt I was prepared to do this work to which God had called me.

And I'm going to tell you, I didn't enjoy it. I have several times been driven into the wilderness by God and so far I've never enjoyed it. On the other hand, these have been the most valuable times in my life. These are the times when I have got a clear sense of who I am and who I am called to be and how God wants me to go about being that person. These are the times when I have grown spiritually, more than in all the good times put together. I didn't enjoy these times. I probably wouldn't have chosen them. But in retrospect, I wouldn't trade them for anything.

Churches also go through these wilderness times. Like individuals and the children of Israel, we don't usually choose them. The Spirit thrusts them on us when we are coasting along enjoying ourselves and suddenly we are in the desert, trying to figure out who we are and what God is calling us to do and how God is calling us to change, to grow, to be transformed, to be formed as God's people living out this new calling, here and now. And these times are not always enjoyable, and people frequently mess up or melt down in the midst of them, as the Israelites did, but they are wonderfully valuable times. They come to us because God believes we are ready for more. And if we stick to it, stick to Jesus in these times, we will not only get through them, but we will get through them as a renewed, strengthened, empowered people, ready to follow God's call to us.

This Lent will be a time for us when we can willingly go deeper in our faith. We can seek out God by fasting, prayer, reading and meditating on the Word of God, and see where God is calling us and how God wants us to live out that call. We can wrestle with some of the temptations, even the same ones Jesus wrestled with of making the good news all about us, or not. But God will always be with us in these wilderness times, whether we feel God's presence or not. God's fiery pillar led the children of Israel through the desert. Angels helped Jesus in his wilderness time and so did the Scriptures. God is with us now and always, leading us through any wilderness times and helping us grow into our full potential, as Christians and as a church.

May this Lent be a blessed time for us all, a time of deepening faith, deepening commitment to follow God and allow God to form us into the people he is calling us to be.