

Reflection for Lent 1B

Genesis 9:8-17; Psalm 25:1-9; 1 Peter 3:18-22; Mark 1:9-15

Sunday, February 18th, 2024

No matter which lectionary year and the gospel we read, the first Sunday in Lent always brings us to the story of Christ's temptation in the desert.

"Tradition holds that Jesus spent these forty days on a mountain that rises above the city of Jericho, probably sleeping in one of its many caves. Jesus would have been able to see the oasis just below him, less than an hour's walk away. He would have seen palm trees and cultivated fields. Fresh fruit and cool spring water were within his view the whole time." (1)



Throughout the scriptures, the wilderness represents a place of preparation, a place of waiting for God's next move, a place of learning to trust in God's redemptive grace.

Jesus didn't choose the wilderness ~ the Spirit drove him, and there he was met by three things: temptation, wild beasts and angels.

"Mark doesn't give us the conversation between Satan and Jesus that we find in Matthew and Luke's gospels. Mark's focus is on the wilderness, that No Mans Land where it's easy to lose direction, to get lost, to feel powerless." (1)

Rev. Dr. David Lose describes it as "a time for reflection about what was likely to be ahead of him...It was a post-baptism, pre-ministry retreat." (2)

We, too, are now in a retreat, preparing ourselves for Easter. We also understand wilderness in the metaphorical sense.

All of us, at some time in our lives, have felt ourselves lost and adrift. The sudden death of a loved one, personal problems manifesting themselves, relationship issues ~ we don't seek these wilderness emotions. Maybe they happen more gradually. Do you ever find yourself sliding into a general confusion about life with what's happening in the world today, from polarizing politics to wars to weather calamities? We can't seem to solve problems that affect so many. It feels exhausting to face each day's challenges. This feeling of helplessness and hopelessness is a temptation ~ of giving up and giving in. (3)

But Jesus didn't give up or give in. When he was in the desert he was faced with temptation. He was with the wild beasts and angels waited on him.

In our first reading from Genesis, we learn of God's promise to Noah that never again would He destroy the earth and what He had created, including all its creatures. "The deep poetry of Genesis suggests that Jesus is together "with the wild beasts" not as foes but as friends...Here ...we get a beautiful glimpse of that peaceable kingdom to come." (4)

Perhaps this is what St. John of the Cross was thinking of when he penned these words during a time of his own wilderness:

*"I was sad one day and went for a walk; I sat in a field.
A rabbit noticed my condition and came near.
It often does not take more than that to help at times –
to just be close to creatures who are so full of knowing,
so full of love that they don't chat.
They just gaze with their marvelous understanding." (5)*

I'd like to think that Jesus found comfort surrounded by these wild beasts during his forty days of wrestling prayer with protective angels around him, for God commanded his angels to guard in all ways. (adapted from Psalm 91 v11)

It doesn't matter how you get to the wilderness, but it's rarely by choice. "You only go there if you have to." And during this season of Lent we have to go there. But while we are there we are protected by angels, just like Jesus. Our angels come in many forms: family, friends, neighbours, even strangers who we meet during our spiritual Lenten journey.

We are urged to retreat, to slow down our minds and souls to focus on the heart of our faith: our relationship with God.

American Benedictine nun and author Joan Chittister notes that "Lent is a call to renew commitment grown dull, perhaps, by a life more marked by routine than by reflection...Lent is the opportunity to change what we ought to change but have not." (6)

Throughout Lent we engage in the spiritual disciplines of prayer and self-examination to draw closer to God as we prepare for the celebration of Easter Sunday.

Many Christians commit to fasting. We try to be more disciplined and give up something we really like...meat? sweets? chocolate? ice cream?
But we can also give up other things for Lent that reflect this time of grace.
So consider:

Give up complaining.focus on gratitude.
Give up pessimism. become an optimist.
Give up worry. trust in God.
Give up discouragement.be full of hope.
Give up bitterness.turn to forgiveness.
Give up negativismbe positive.
Give up anger.be more patient.
Give up jealousy.pray for trust.
Give up gossiping.control your tongue.
Give up gloom. enjoy the beauty that is all around you. (Stories for Sermons, kayala.com)

Enjoy the beauty that is all around you. Embrace your inner beauty.

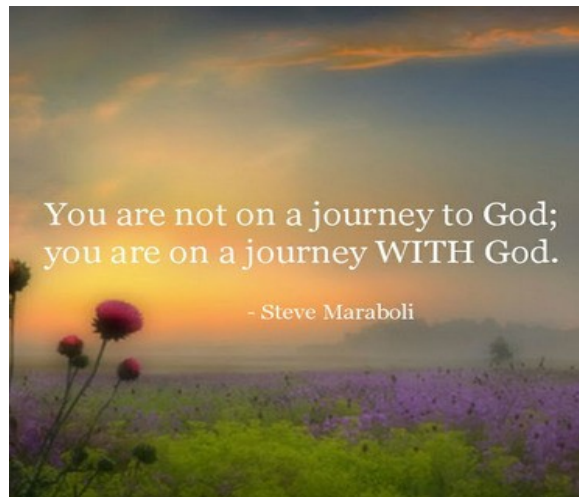
(7): God asks us to take a good look at who we are. He asks us to open our hearts to Him. He gave us Jesus to help us understand that being human is difficult. But God wants us to push all the negativity aside and simply let Him in. He's asking us to take these days of Lent, clear the clutter and simply walk with Him and His son, Jesus.

See what he did for us. See how he reached out to the poor. Watch how compassionate he was with the sick, how he touched those who were untouchable. Watch how he forgave those who hurt him so much. Pray like he prayed.

Jesus showed us the way. All we have to do is simply follow his footsteps. Allow his grace to pour over us. Allow peace to enter our hearts and minds and we will feel a freedom that only we can retrieve from within.

It sounds hard....giving up something seems simpler. But God wants us to try!
Let's start our Lenten journey with Him!
Amen.

- 1 A Fool's Errand – Sermon on Mark 1:9-15 by Jo Anne Taylor, February 18, 2018 Lent 1B, apastorsings.com
- 2 Into Temptation by David Lose, March 7, 2011, workingpreacher.org
- 3 Sermon for Lent 1B by Rev. Anna Tew, 2024, episcopalchurch.org
- 4 "Change Your Life: SALT's Commentary for Lent 1", 2024, saltproject.org
- 5 "A Rabbit Noticed My Condition" from *Love Poems from God: Twelve Sacred Voices From the East and West*, translated by Daniel Ladinsky, pg. 323
- 6 *The Liturgical Year The Spiraling Adventure of the Spiritual Life* by Sister Joan Chittister, 2009
- 7 adapted from "A Story for lenten reflection" by Sister Diane Mason, 2014, spsmsw.org



*Wrestling prayer can wonders do,
Bring relief in deepest straits;
Prayer can force a passage through
Iron bars and brazen gates.*

~ John Newton, Hymn 61, verse 4