

## **Temptations in the Wilderness**

Matthew 4:1-11 by Patty Friesen (Mar.1/20)

Today is the first Sunday of Lent and “I’m not in the mood for Lent,” I told my spiritual director this week. She patiently listened to my rant as I continued “I feel like I live in Lent most of the year when we have beloved church members who are ill or who have passed away. I can’t reflect on any more suffering – not even Jesus’. I’m skipping Lent and preparing Easter Sunday instead.” She waited for me to continue. “But I guess, that is the point of the church calendar and lectionary readings – to help us remember even the painful Bible stories which we might otherwise ignore.” She said calmly, “We’ll see how you are doing at the end of Lent.”

So for Lent, we have created a worship space with sand bowls as we enter worship and repurposed twisted metal candelabras to remind us of Jesus in the desert wilderness. We will visually be reminded of the wilderness every time we come to church culminating in our Good Friday service and Easter Sunday. Each week we will extinguish a candle as we draw closer to Good Friday. Lent is a safe place to work out the drama of difficulty in the Jesus story and in our own physical and spiritual lives. We’ll see how we are all doing after Lent!

Jesus has been led by the Holy Spirit into the wilderness for forty days and forty nights. The symbol of forty days and forty nights is reminiscent of the flood in the book of Genesis and the children’s song about Noah - It rained and rained for forty nights and days daisies = almost drove those animals crazy, crazies - children of the Lord. The symbol of forty appears again as the children of Israel wandered in the wilderness for forty years.

Jesus fasts for forty days and nights and is famished so of course the first temptation to use his power will be to turn stones into bread to feed himself. Jesus will multiply loaves of bread later in his ministry but as a prophetic act of feeding others not as a power grab initiated by the devil. This mention of the devil is interesting because it is the first and last place the devil takes a particular form and speaks. There will be ongoing temptations later for Jesus for power or temptations to abandon his mission - but this is the first and last time the devil takes a particular physical form and voice and he is handily denied.

The second temptation is for Jesus to throw himself off the pinnacle of the temple like superman and be caught by angels. Again this temptation to self-aggrandizement and drama is denied by Jesus. The third temptation is the power of the kingdoms of the world but Jesus is choosing the path of humility and servant-hood. As a servant, God will raise him up to be Lord of heaven and earth but while on earth Jesus chooses the path of humility. He will continually be tempted by these same temptations for power and magic and he will continually have to choose the humble path.

While I do not believe the devil is hiding behind every bush, I do believe good and evil exist within ourselves and within our human systems and we are always making choices in our lives that tempt us toward power over others or self-serving notions. Lent is a time to reflect on the temptations we all face to ignore the hard questions facing us of what does it mean to follow Jesus? What does it mean to enter into the wilderness and choose to know ourselves as beloved daughters and sons of God? (p. 32, Wendy Wright, *The Rising*)

In May I am intentionally choosing to use my four-week sabbatical to be in the desert wilderness of southern Saskatchewan - in Grasslands National Park East and West and Cypress Hills. I went there on a month long sabbatical three years ago in July 2017 when the National Parks were free where I baked hiking in 42 degree heat and ran away from snakes and got chased by a hawk because I was too close to her nest. The desert is a scary, dangerous, lonely place. Three years ago, I was comforted and accompanied by people I met along the way - including the high school teacher in Eastend who found the T-Rex dinosaur and the biker dude who hiked with me after I saw a bear on the trail in Waterton National Park.

That desert sabbatical strengthened and focused me for these past three years of ministry and as difficult as it was, I want to go back there in May with my truck and trailer for more solitude and prayer and reflection. I know I will get scared and lonely so I'm going to visit Vanessa at Camp Elim south of Swift Current and visit Keri Siebert's parents in Main Centre while they are seeding. I am going to watch bird migrations and hike and write a sabbatical journal that I will publish for the church library when I get back so the church can see if I gleaned anything from these wilderness ponderings.

The early Christian mystics went to live in the desert because they were convinced that discipleship meant a radical transformation of life and so they left the false values of the world and fled to the desert to do battle with the devil in their own hearts. Pride, greed, self-aggrandizement, lust for power - all the false motivations that drive human beings - were ferreted out and replaced by the spirit of Christ: the spirit of compassion, humility and purity of heart.

The key to the transformation of the desert was the Christian's listening ear. In silence and solitude they cultivated a hearing attuned to catch the voice of God. They learned that going apart from the environment of daily life to the silence of the desert enabled them to perceive deeper levels. In the desert's quiet they discovered the noisiness within, the restless cacophony of voices raging in their hearts. Yet if they persevered further, they found that beneath all that was a level of silence within the human heart where the voice of God could be clearly heard.

Lent is a time for tuning our ears, for listening carefully, for discerning the texture and quality of our own demons, for attending to God's unceasing, creative voice amid the noise of cultural pressures, the busyness of life and our own self-limiting habits. We may have become inattentive to our own eating and drinking and binge-watching TV series and internet shopping. We may need to curb some bad habits. We may need to cultivate a more rhythmic pattern of prayer or bring the scriptures into clearer focus in our everyday life. We may need to mend the pieces of a broken relationship. We may need to take some of the time we hoard so tightly for work and lavish it on our children or friends. We may be called to respond to the cry of the poor, to feed the hungry, to shelter the homeless or to visit the prisoner. All these callings can rightly be discerned as God's promoting us to a freer life.

But the ongoing process of listening and discernment, which is the invitation of Lent is not always so straightforward. It involves a radical and risky self-evaluation and a commitment to rethink and rework everything we know and are. God is always calling us out of ourselves into a more generous freedom, so that we can love and serve more authentically. (p. 33 Wright).

Throughout Lent these next six weeks, we will have a ritual of response after the sermon - today we are invited to take the stones that Jesus was tempted to turn into bread and which represent the temptations or vulnerabilities of our lives and place the stones into the bowls of water, as an act of repentance and desire. Each week we will extinguish a candle as we draw closer to Good Friday. At the end of our response - we will extinguish a Lenten candle and sing our closing hymn.

Let us pray: Loving God who is with us in wilderness, journey with us these next weeks as we think about you and re-enact the story of your journey with Jesus. Amen.