

Sermons at Saint Paul's

A Wellspring of spiritual; nourishment; A river of service in Jesus' Name

Lent I

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The season of Lent ushers us into a period of self-denial and digging deep. It is a time where we literally and figuratively walk into the wilderness with Jesus. The wilderness is a scary place, it is lonely and dark. What is there in the wilderness, but complete and absolute boredom and idleness? There is no bed, no chair, no shade, no comfort, but the harsh reality of nothing. When has the existence of nothing ever compelled us to consider the nothing of nothingness? Well, there may be nothing in the wilderness, but life abounds in the wilderness because that is the place we come face-to-face with our own reality and the God who dwells both within us, outside of us and who saves us. The God who redeems us doesn't spare a moment to remind us of His saving grace.

In the Old Testament story, we are reminded of God's saving acts in redeeming the people of Israel from slavery in Egypt. But it also placed a burden on the redeemed, that in appreciation of God's act of grace, the people were to honor God by denying themselves of some of the first fruits of their harvest. In fact, the idea that in giving thanks, they were to invoke the fact that their ancestor was a wandering Aramean who found himself in Egypt, and became a mighty nation, was meant to remind the people that God had been with them all the way, God has been faithful, and that in hearing and responding to their cry, God was acting on His mercy. And so the act of denying ourselves of some of the first fruits of the land not only points to our efforts at gratitude, but that it reconnects us to the God who saves.

The reality is God's act of redeeming those in bondage did not end with the deliverance from Egypt, they continued. But the cry for help is different; the human cry to be redeemed is different. The burden was heavy, and even heavier than being in slavery. It was a kind of burden where both the slave and the free sought to be free from; in fact the burden of sin was too heavy carry. And so the cry for redemption was one in which God had to send God's son to redeem humanity from the burden of sin. That's why Paul makes the claim in the Letter to the Romans that those who believe in their heart and confess that Jesus is Lord will be saved, saved from the bondage of sin in which we dwell and which we carry with us all our lives.

Paul's suggestion doesn't mean that the challenges we face will go away when we confess and believe, if anything at all, the temptation of Jesus after his baptism and fasting points to the contrary. We have been strengthened by the spirit in our baptism, and in our participation in the baptismal experience of others. But the wilderness awaits, and it awaits with a lifetime of temptations and goodies to draw us back into the life we have rejected.

Although the wilderness offers no tangible riches, as there is nothing to see or hear, Jesus was willing to go to the wilderness. The wilderness may not offer anything, but it does offer us the space to stare deep into the abyss of our lives in hopes of finding meaning, in hopes of finding that which is relevant, in hopes reconnecting with ourselves in a way that propels our understanding of the world around us.

The world around us often prevent us from engaging ourselves, the world around us makes us believe we are too busy to take a day for self-reflection or even worse to take an hour of self-reflection. We are too busy to take a moment for prayer, and to even talk to people with whom we share a table. We cannot put our cellphones away at dinner, think

about the countless times you have been to a restaurant and seen people actually fidgeting with their cellphones and not talking with each other. We not only detest being bored but we abhor solitude. But the very things which the wilderness offers us-solitude and boredom, are all we need, if we are to reconnect with ourselves in order to fend off the kind of temptations that come our way.

Being alone in a way is synonymous with looking in the mirror. For in that moment when we are alone, for once concentrating on ourselves and taking stock of our own lives, where we have been, where we are and where we going, so long as we are honest with ourselves, life often takes on a different meaning.

I was reading about John Keats the other day, and learned some pretty interesting stories about his life. More importantly, I learned a great deal about his regard for solitude. Although he lived a challenging life which was compounded by more sorrow than he could bear at his age, he valued solitude as the avenue by which we can access beauty and truth. In a Letter he wrote to his brother George and his wife Georgina, John Keats write about his decision not to marry “Think of my pleasure in Solitude, in comparison of my commerce with the world-there I am a child-there they do not know me, not even my most intimate acquaintance-I give into their feelings as though I were refraining from irritating a little child-Some think me middling, others silly, others foolish-everyone thinks he seeks my weak side against my will; when in truth it is with my will-I am content to be thought all this because I have in my own breast so great a resource.” For Keats, solitude was a great resource, not only because the sacred road to love and beauty passed through the gates of solitude, but that it is in solitude that we find the most sacred and beautiful space where we feel wholly at home.

But what is there to do in the wilderness if it is not about being exposed to the reality of being vulnerable and exposed to the harsh realities of being bored and alone? Lent is the counter cultural season. It is the season where being bored is an appropriate spiritual exercise. Lent is a season where being in solitude is being lost in order to find yourself. Wendell Berry once wrote that “True solitude is found in the wild places, where one is without human obligation. One’s inner voices become audible...In consequence, one responds more clearly to other lives.”

Lent is a season where we must desire to walk into the wilderness with Jesus. For although there is nothing in the wilderness, it is there that we can hear ourselves, it is there that we can learn what it means to be alive, it is there that we can understand what it means to love. And so this Lent, come, let’s walk together into the wilderness-where we can be experience a true gift of Lent, being alone and bored, just so we can find ourselves. Amen