The First Sunday in Lent (3/10/19)  


Almighty God, whose blessed Son was led by the Spirit to be tempted by Satan: Come quickly to help us who are assaulted by many temptations; and, as you know the weaknesses of each of us, let each one find you mighty to save; through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

I have written a shorter sermon this morning in light of our litany-lengthened liturgy. You’re welcome; but no alle-u-know-whats in Lent!

Often, when we encounter this familiar story of Jesus facing the temptations—a story oft-told during Lent—and our focus is on the temptations themselves. And there is, indeed, a lot there to think about. This morning, however, I would like to dwell with you on the setting, the backdrop of this story: the wilderness.

Luke doesn’t really specify where exactly this wilderness is. He doesn’t need to. While he was likely referring to the desert terrain east and south of Palestine—a rugged, arid landscape you really wouldn’t want to spend much time in—having the exact location here is beside the point. We can all imagine this wilderness scene: deserted, desolate, unpopulated, uncultivated, inhospitable, bleak. The where here is not as important as the what. Jesus finds himself in a nothing place.

And this is not the first time that the wilderness, a nothing place, has served as the backdrop to the biblical narrative. It is, in fact, a recurrent mise-en-scène.

Consider how the wilderness serves as the narrative context for a large chunk of the Hebrew Scriptures: beginning, of course, with the wilderness wanderings of Israel after their liberation from slavery in Egypt. The path to the Promised Land is not straightforward for Israel. Instead, they spend some 40 years wandering about in the Sinai Peninsula. The wilderness figures prominently in the drama that plays out over those four decades, as God’s people are again and again tested by their desert environs and forced to choose: whether they are to rely on God, or give up and seek their own way. Sometimes they get it right; sometimes they get it wrong. But through it all, God is with them. Leading them through their wilderness with a pillar of cloud by day and a fire by night. Providing manna from heaven. Calling forth water from rocks.

No doubt, Israel faced very real hardship in the wilderness. Yet you could say that is was precisely the wilderness that taught them that they cannot rely on themselves, that they were not the fashioners of their own destiny. The wilderness forced them to recognize their total reliance, their complete dependency on God.
To cite just two more examples, both Moses and Elijah—the two greatest prophets in the Hebrew Scriptures—faced a wilderness torrance all their own. Both of them, at different points in their life, found themselves forced out into the wilderness for a 40-day period of fasting: intentional abstinence from food and other usual indulgences. They were both completely lost in life at that point. They felt like they had lost their way, lost their purpose, their sense of direction. They’d almost given up entirely. But, in both cases (Exodus 34.10-27, 1 Kings 19.8), what they found was that as the wilderness pushed them to their personal, physical, spiritual brink, God was there. God was there for them. God never left them. It was, perhaps, just that they each needed to find themselves in the wilderness to see it. Desperation is just another way of acknowledging our complete dependency.

And that is the thing about the wilderness. It doesn’t have to be a nothing place. Quite the contrary, some of the most intensive work of the Spirit is—however paradoxically—often accomplished in the wilderness.

Back to Jesus, then. We don’t exactly know what compelled him out into the wilderness, except that Luke notes that he “was led by the Spirit” (Luke 4.1). He was led there. Led there. He didn’t just happen onto it. Nothing, in the biblical imagination, just “happens.” God, in the biblical imagination, is always there, always active, always at work to bring about God’s good purposes in the world. Even when we cannot, in the moment, see it (and, God knows, we often don’t in the moment). Even when God seems anything but present, God is always there. Always at work. Always leading us.

We don’t exactly know why Jesus was in the wilderness, except that he was led there. And—just like Israel amid her 40-year journey, just like Moses and Elijah amid their 40-day journeys—Jesus is tested, tempted. At the heart of these temptations is what is at the heart of every temptation, going all the way back to the Garden of Eden: the temptation to give into the delusion, the delusion, that we can go at it in this life without relying fully, completely on God; without looking to God as our source and sustenance.

No, the wilderness in the biblical imagination is not a nothing place. Quite the contrary, it is the place where some of the most dramatic, intensive work of the Spirit is accomplished. Perhaps precisely because it is the place where we are best disabused of that illusion that our lives are our own, that we create our own futures, that we are the masters of our own destinies, that we’re in control. The wilderness is the place, perhaps the only place, where we can be adequately reminded of our complete dependency on God.

We have all found ourselves in the wilderness. We have all found ourselves in those places in life when we realize that we are not in control. We’re not calling the shots like we thought we were. Life happens. Life happens to us. We thought we were headed one way, we thought everything was on track, and suddenly we find ourselves in the wilderness. And it can be utterly terrifying. It can feel like our world was turned upside down and inside out, like are left alone and adrift. But we are not. We are never alone. We never were alone; we never will be alone. God is always, always with us. Even in the wilderness.

It may well feel, with all the transitions ahead in this parish, that we are headed into a wilderness. That may be a bit extreme, but it well may be how some of you feel: the turnover, upheaval, uncertainty.
But I want you to hear this: God is here. God has been here, God will be here. God has never abandoned us, God has never abandoned you, God will never abandon you. God is leading you; God is leading God’s church.

Do not lose sight of the way in which God is at work. Do not lose sight of—no, double down on—your dependency on God. Keep your eyes on him; always, only, on him. And his perfect provision. His trustworthy providence. His ordering of the chaos. His demonstrable love.

Stripped down to full dependency on the Father, this is what Jesus grasped in the wilderness. And, arguably, that is why he was led there. To demonstrate for us what faith looks like. Faith not in ourselves, but in God’s lovingkindness, God’s protection, God’s provision.

For with God—as Jesus knew, as Jesus demonstrated—there is no nothing place. There is only, ever something.

With God, there is no wilderness. There is only promised land. Amen.