

The First Sunday in Lent, 21 February 2010

Saint James Episcopal Church, Tigard OR

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Lent is a time when we as individuals and Christian communities are driven out into the wilderness as Jesus is in today's Gospel. It was the Spirit who took him out there. It is Church tradition which takes us out there. Lent is a voluntary wilderness. Jesus went out to confront the land of fear in order to be ready for his public ministry. We go out in order to be ready to cleanse away all of the clutter in our minds and spirits that impede our ministries, that block our ears to the voice of God.

In this week's *Journey with Jesus*, my old colleague Professor Rebecca Lymer says, "Finding God in the wilderness is finding God precisely everywhere we are afraid or lost." Human life is filled with experiences of fear and loss. Sometimes we know it's coming – and sometimes as for my family this week it is sudden and unexpected. Lent helps us learn to weather these times, just as Jesus' time in the wilderness brought him further into the experience of what it is to be human.

The story from Exodus shows us a typical pattern of human life: we find ourselves in 'Egypt', a place that is not home, a place of unwelcome, and we cry out in pain and loneliness. Our cry is heard by Holy One at the heart of the universe and we are led into the wilderness where we find our true selves and gradually let go of all of the false hopes and false allegiances, the golden calves and assorted lesser gods, until we are led to our true home.

Once we find ourselves at home, our first response is gratitude, and that gratitude is properly the fabric of our life ever after. That is a wonderful summary of the spiritual journey, of our lives together. In some lives the whole thing happens once over the course of life; for more of us it is repeated several times.

Some people ask who is there to thank for the sense of home – or for my cousin Sharon who just died – or for the daffodils. They see these things as just happening on their own. If no one did anything, there is no one to thank. But we are filled with gratitude and we know there is someone to thank.

These days some people talk about 'the Universe' and there is real truth in that. Some of the same truth is expressed within the Church with the growing preponderance of referring to God as "the Holy One". The Holy One at the origin and heart of creation. All that is exists at all because of the Holy One, because of the Love that is the most real thing, the one we call God.

This use of other terms reflects our experience, our unwillingness to let our image and experience of the ultimate reality be confined by any small human concept. I can say ‘God’ or ‘Holy One’ or ‘Love’ or ‘Universe’ – but I do not mean any narrow or limited concept by any of those. They are meant to touch what is beyond all human language. We adjust our language to express our sense of home, of the Spirit that guides to and in and through the wilderness of our lives.

The Spirit, the One who is all holiness, leads us into the wilderness, is found in the wilderness, comes back with us.

It is in the wilderness that we cement our relationship with the Divine, that we acknowledge our inability to make a home for ourselves, and our trust that this Love will embrace us and provide a home for us. Often we call for God to come quickly, but we know that the Holy One is always there, whether we can recognize that presence or not. In one of our Eucharistic Prayers, we pray, “Open our eyes to see your hand at work in the world about us.” That is part of what intentional wilderness experiences like Lent are about: we eliminate some of the indulgences and distractions of our lives, the things we use to cushion ourselves from the experience of aloneness or apprehension. We eliminate them, allowing us more intentional time to see and hear, to open our hearts to the love surrounding us.

In *The Brothers Karamazov*, Dostoevsky includes a short story written by one of the characters in which the Grand Inquisitor incarcerates Christ and says that the Church has accepted the temptation that we see Jesus rejecting in today’s Gospel. He describes them as ‘miracle, mystery, and authority’. These are temptations fit for the Son of God, or for a great religious institution, but not so much for most of us.

In her reflection Rebecca describes these temptations as ‘food, safety and authority’, what Jesus, as a human, felt he was entitled to. We do feel entitled to those things – and we put structures in place in our societies to try to assure that each person has food enough, is safe from as many dangers as possible, and has some manner of authority at least over his or her own life. But what we find in the wilderness is that, while all of those things may be desirable, they are not guaranteed.

When God says to Dame Julian that ‘All shall be well and all shall be well and all manner of thing shall be well’, he is not saying that we will have food and safety and authority. God is saying that everything will be alright for us, even if we do not have them, even if we find ourselves far from any human help in the bleakest possible wilderness.

In his wilderness, the extraordinarily bleak and arid Judean wilderness, we find Jesus using biblical quotes to keep him grounded when assaulted by temptations, by urges to leave the path of truth and give in to fear and self-seeking. This use of quotations struck me differently this reading, because our Easter book this year will be made up of favorite quotes, quotes from scripture or other inspiring writings that help us to resist the temptations to self-indulgence, fear, or despair.

Jesus' conversation with the Tempter is one example of the many ways that we can be sustained by words of Scripture and devotion. In this case they were a check, a reminder of how we are supposed to think and live.

At the Mission Fair after the 10am service there will be an opportunity to buy prayer beads, which many of us use for our devotions. The beads themselves help us when we are repeating particular phrases of prayer or scriptural quotations.

Mine is 'ιησου χριστε, θεου υιοσ, σωτηρ ελειςον. "Jesus Christ, Son of God, Savior, have mercy" (in Greek). In our wilderness times we may each discover particular quotations, mantras, prayers, or images which ground our hearts and lead them back to the Holy One who is always with us to protect us, to guide us, to feed us and keep us safe.

You may say your favorite passages to yourself when you encounter a familiar temptation. You may write them out and hang them on the wall or your bulletin board. You may say them to your children to nurture their sense of the Holy. You may include them in your daily prayers.

You may have noticed that during Lent we have decided to try using the alternative closing for the scripture readings in the service, "Hear what the Spirit is saying to God's people." This is a reminder that in scripture we find both what God has done and said in times past, and also what is being said to us today. Today is not the same as yesterday, and so each time we hear a passage again we hear a new word for a new day – perhaps different words for you and for me. I am grieving; you may be rejoicing or confused or lonely or ... There is always a word for us, the Spirit speaking to us. Also, and perhaps even more importantly the Spirit is continually speaking to the community, to the Body of All Faithful People throughout the world, to the whole Episcopal Church, to the Diocese of Oregon, to the Sunset Convocation, to Saint James parish.

The Word is there; we merely need to have ears to hear what the Spirit is saying to us in that moment through what we hear or read. This is one of the most important ways in which God speaks to us.

So as we venture into the wilderness, looking for home, let us take Scripture as our Guide, knowing that the Holy One is always there with wisdom and guidance for us. As we spend more time reading and studying Scripture, let us remember the wonderful prayer for the Feast of Saint Jerome:

O Lord, O God of truth, your Word is a lantern to our feet and a light upon our path: We give you thanks for your servant Jerome, and those who, following in his steps, have labored to render the Holy Scriptures in the language of the people; and we pray that your Holy Spirit will overshadow us as we read the written Word, and that Christ, the living Word, will transform us according to your righteous will.