

March 6, 2022

First Lent, Year C

Deuteronomy 26: 1-11

Psalm 91: 1-2, 9-16

Luke 4: 1-13

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After his baptism, Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, where for forty days he was tempted by the devil. He ate nothing at all during those days, and when they were over, he was famished. The devil said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread." Jesus answered him, "It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone.'"

Then the devil led him up and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. And the devil said to him, "To you I will give their glory and all this authority; for it has been given over to me, and I give it to anyone I please. If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours." Jesus answered him, "It is written, 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.'"

Then the devil took him to Jerusalem, and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here, for it is written, 'He will command his angels concerning you, to protect you,'

and

'On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.'"

Jesus answered him, "It is said, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'" When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

As we begin this new season of Lent, we might understandably be a little confused. Last week, we stood with Peter, James and John on a mountaintop,

witnessing the Transfiguration of Jesus, when he appears with Elijah and Moses, and is seen for a moment in the glory of the resurrection, offering hope as Jesus faces Jerusalem.

And now, a week later, the lectionary takes us backwards in time to the moment after his baptism by John in the Jordan River, the moment when the Holy Spirit leads Jesus into the wilderness.

But traveling, even being led, into the wilderness gives us a fitting place to begin our Lenten journey.

What do we picture when we hear wilderness?

The cover of our bulletin shows perhaps a typical wilderness vision....a desert, dry, hot, rocks, an inhospitable environment.

Depending on the person, when we hear of wilderness we might picture the Badlands of the Dakotas, the sand flats of Utah or the deserts of Africa.

When I picture wilderness, I remember the area Tim and I drove through in northern Maine, in a driving rainstorm and before dawn, heading to Canada to visit friends years ago. The drive passed through miles upon miles of uninhabited forests, no signs of humans as we drove from darkness into a wet and foggy dawn. Few cars traveled the road that early, and no cheerful fast-food signs offered warmth and light and fellow travelers.

When we hear the word wilderness, we may each see a different landscape in our mind's eye, but many of our visions of wilderness seem to have in common a low population of humans, a place where we are alone.

In fact, one commentator noted that:

In Hebrew, one of the words for wilderness is more literally translated as "the wordless place." (The Rev Jennifer Moland-Kovash, Christian Century, 2/23/2022)

The wordless place, no conversation, no assurance of another voice, even if it is simply the "good morning" of a clerk at a gas station after hours alone with your thoughts, driving in the Maine woods.

And we tend to picture Jesus absolutely alone in the wilderness, on his own as he faces the Devil, singlehandedly rejecting the temptations of consumption and power and fame.

And yet, as Jesus responds to each temptation, he offers words from the ancestors, quoting Deuteronomy:

"One does not live by bread alone."

"Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him."

"Do not put the Lord your God to the test."

Jesus was alone physically in the wilderness, but he was not abandoned; he kept close the words and comfort and companionship of his ancestors, the Israelites, who wandered too in wilderness, and though often in despair, were never alone.

This week presented me with a few occasions to ponder wilderness.

On Ash Wednesday, Trinity tried something new and perhaps quirky; rather than a traditional service, we offered Drive-Through Ashes. This idea was based on a practice that started about ten years ago in larger churches located in cities. Clergy would take the ashes and go to busy locations, like metro stops or downtowns, and offer ashes to passersby. This practice was named Ashes To Go.

Since we have no metro stops in Lancaster County, we decided to offer ashes at our drive-through lane at the Pavilion.

Honestly, I worried that this idea, that I brought to the Vestry, would be a flop. Was it too odd for our county? Would anyone show up?

I decided that, since we had a little more time with folks than if we met them at a metro stop, after marking the ashes on their foreheads, I would ask if there was anyone they would like me to offer prayer for.

I had a great team supporting me in this quirky offering. Charlie and Josie Spencer cheerfully covered the parking lot and waved folks in from the road, guiding them to the Pavilion drive. Their wonderful Mom, Danielle, came Charlie and Josie from running into the road in their enthusiasm to attract participants, and she visited with folks who parked and came into the Pavilion.

Deb Lockhart, one of our Parish Admins, who is studying for ordination as a permanent deacon, worked with me as each car drove in.

And cars did drive in! Some came because they could not get to their own church for ashes, and the drive-through helped, especially those for whom walking was challenging. Others came from our churches, and still others appreciated the late afternoon timing allowing them to come after work.

And then there were the prayers. Folks were surprised at the offer for prayer, but took a moment to think of who was on their heart, and then allowed us to join them in their wilderness.

Prayers for friends who are ill, prayers for grandchildren looking for work, prayers for relatives facing challenges, and several asked for prayers for Ukraine.

Wilderness in our souls, wilderness in our community, wilderness in our world, but we are not alone, we are not in the place of no words. We share our worrying hearts, and words of the ancestors, words of prayer make the wilderness less desolate, less lonely, and as Jesus walked first in the wilderness, our brother and savior is with us too.

I would like to end this sermon focusing on Ukraine. Our world is so small now; Ukraine can feel so far away but a number of those at the Drive-Through Ashes had connections, family, friends in Ukraine.

We feel so helpless as we watch the news, in anguish and horror at how ordinary lives have been broken apart by Putin's attacks through the Russian military. We have all seen the faces of Ukrainians, determined, frightened, crying, hopeful.

A priest colleague in Arlington shared a poem written by a fellow minister from a United Church of Christ congregation there, The Rev Laura Martin. Her poem honors those faces and offers a hope for peace. Honestly Laura's poem feels like a prayer to me.

As we know wilderness in our own lives, and especially today in Ukraine, may we remember and call out in prayer so that none feel alone in the wilderness.

Amen.

One note for the poem; I have learned this week that the sunflower is the national flower of Ukraine, hence its inclusion in the poem.

The poem is entitled:

“How do you write a poem about war?”

***“How do you write a poem about war?
Do you start with the little girl
Crossing the soil that her grandfather loved,
Holding her cat?
Or do you begin with the Russian boys
Conscripted into tragedy,
Conviction not appearing on command?
Maybe you begin with the old men sheltering in subways
And the ones who have seen two wars already
Standing guard outside.
Maybe you begin in the basement of the hospital
Where nurses rock babies,
Blessing beyond religion.
Maybe you begin with a President who values
The sound of democracy more than
His own living voice.
But of course the question is never really
How do you begin a poem about war,
But always ‘how does it end?’
It ends when everyone—
The little girl,
The conscripted soldiers,
The old men,
The babies,
The nurses,
The President—
Can lie down under our shared stars,
And sleep,
Then wake up to sunflowers growing.”***

***The Reverend Laura Martin
Rockspring United Church of Christ, Arlington
(Sunflowers are the national flower of Ukraine)***

