

St. Mark's Episcopal Church
Sermon: March 10, 2019
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Lent 1C

*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.*

I love and hate Lent in almost equal measures. I love Lent, because Lent tells the truth. I hate Lent, because the truth Lent tells is usually not at all what I would prefer.

I would not prefer the wilderness. I would not prefer the cross. But there they are. In the church and in my life. And sometimes there's no getting around them.

It's like the "Going on a Bear Hunt" board book we used to read to our babies: "Uh oh! A wilderness! A great big wilderness. You can't go over it, you can't go under it, you can't go around it...we'll have to go THROUGH IT: stumble trip! Stumble trip! Stumble trip!"

The shape and contours of the wilderness around us are always changing...

Everything seems to be fine, when suddenly we look around, and find ourselves disoriented, unsure where to go, in the wilderness of illness, of grief in the wilderness of a break-up, of a lay-off in the wilderness of a job, or a relationship, or a life that just isn't what we would prefer.

When we find ourselves in the wilderness:

It's easy to feel lost--like we've ended up in the wilderness because we've taken a wrong turn, or taken a wrong step, or misplaced the map, or misread the signs.

When we find ourselves in the wilderness:

It's easy to feel alone--like we've abandoned God, or God has abandoned us, or maybe like there is no God at all.

The BAD news of the Gospel is this: If we are living a fully human life--if we're following in the footsteps of Jesus who was not only fully God, but also fully human--our journey is going to take us through the wilderness.

The GOOD news of the Gospel is this: when we find ourselves in the wilderness, we can be assured that the wilderness is just part of the story--it is never the whole story, it is

never the end. And we can be assured that, even when we feel lonely, we are never really alone.

Today's Gospel begins with these words:

*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.*

Even in the wilderness, the Gospel tells us, Jesus is FULL of the Holy Spirit--the Holy Spirit is IN Him--and Jesus is LED by the Spirit--the Holy Spirit goes BEFORE Him.

Jesus didn't wander into the wilderness because he wasn't praying enough, and lost touch with the Spirit within him. Jesus didn't stumble into the wilderness because he wasn't paying attention and lost sight of his Spirit guide. Jesus, FULL of the Holy Spirit, FOLLOWED the Spirit into and through the wilderness.

And so it is for us--even in our wilderness we can trust that the Holy Spirit is within us and before us...

We can believe that, even in the midst of the wilderness God's own breath is FILLING us and LEADING us.

But it can be so hard to remember it when we can't feel it.
And it can be so hard to trust it when we can't see it.

Which is why, like Jesus, we can be so especially vulnerable to temptation when we are in the wilderness.

*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.*

It happened to Jesus. And it happens to us.

I find the key to every temptation--the temptations Jesus faced and the temptations we face-- in those very first words that slip out of the devil's mouth:

"If you are the Son of God..."

Back in January, the Gospel carried us to the River where we heard the voice of God saying, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

Last Sunday, the Gospel carried us up the Mountain where we heard the voice of God saying:

"This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!"
"You are my Child," God says, "My beloved"
"You are my Child", God says, "My Chosen"

Over and over God says it to Jesus.
Over and over God says it to us.

"You are my Child," God says, "My beloved"
"You are my Child", God says, "My Chosen"

But the devil slips in to challenge God's claim...

Chanting in diabolical counterpoint to God's endless love song:

IF you are the Child of God....

In the wilderness it's easy to have our doubts.
To forget God's voice.
To question God's choice.

Am I really God's Child? God's Beloved? God's Chosen?

And that's when we're tempted to settle for less...

Maybe it's too much to hope for the bread of heaven...
So, I settle for regular bread--for material gain...I flee from my hunger and strive for some comfort.
If it's too much to hope for the bread of heaven...I'd better enjoy some cheesecake and wine.

Maybe it's too much to hope for God's Kingdom.
So, I settle for worldly kingdoms-- for authority, power...I flee from vulnerability and strive for control
If it's too much to hope to be an heir of God's Kingdom, I'd better be the valedictorian, or team captain or CFO.

Maybe it's too much to hope for eternal life.

So, I settle for angels--for protection from harm...I flee from danger and strive for security.

If it's too much to hope for eternal life, I'd better get the most out of this one, and make it last as long as I can.

The deeper I go into my wilderness--and the farther I travel from my baptismal waters-- the more tempting safety and control and comfort become.

Maybe it's too much to ask to be Chosen by God. But is it too much to ask to be comfortable?

No, it's not too much to ask to be comfortable.

Beloved of God: It's too little.

We know it deep down:

The tempter's best offer is a cheap substitute for the irrevocable Call and Promise of God.

And, that I believe, is why we come here, today. That is why we gather together for worship.

As we enter the Wilderness, we draw near to the font to help us remember the River. As we move through the Wilderness, we draw near to the altar to help us remember the Mount.

We gather to worship and listen together, with our hearts, and minds and souls, and bodies--

We gather to worship and listen together---beyond our discomfort and fear and despair--

If we pay close attention,

From the edge of the wilderness

We can still feel the tingle of the baptismal waters;

We can still sense the light that shines forth on the Mount;

If we pay close attention,

From the heart of the wilderness

We can still feel the tug of the Spirit within us...

We can still hear the call of the Spirit before us:

"My Child, My Chosen, My Beloved"

And even when we CAN'T feel it, or hear it, or see it, we can count on the church--on the liturgy and on the community-- to remind us it's true.

Spirit of God, Come fill us, and lead us
Into the wilderness--then through and beyond--
into the wild and dangerous, radiant fullness
of the resurrected life you have promised the Children of God.

Amen.