

Lent 1 Year B

“You are my son, my beloved; I delight in choosing you. And the Spirit immediately threw Jesus out into the desert.”

Who here has been to a desert? It has a mystery all its own. While I was in seminary, Katharine and I traveled with some friends to the Texas Big Bend, which is in western Texas along the Mexican border. We wanted to witness first hand the mysterious beauty of this desert so lauded by people we knew who had been there...and they were right... it was beautiful; it was as if we were on another planet... Rock formations painted in elegant and subtle pastel; cacti of infinite variety; the prehistoric looking ocotillo transplanted from some alien world I imagined; Silverado sage blooming a deep lavender; the poignant smell of creosote in the air; Agaves, so called century plants blooming fifty feet tall; a coyote; birds reeling indignant to our presence; converging mountain ranges honed over millions upon millions of years by wind, water and earthquake; craggy igneous peaks erupting from the earth towards heaven; At night, in the absence of artificial light that so pervades our world, one can see dramatically the river of gas and ore and metal we call the milky way; planets appearing somehow closer than ever; more stars than I have ever seen wheeling in a vast and mysterious order... Some say one is closer to God in a desert...that may be.

But there is another side to the desert. At the welcome station I noticed a brochure that suggested appropriate behavior if one were to encounter one of the wild animals indigenous to the area: snakes, coyotes, mountain lions, bears.(O my) We were told to keep quantities of water with us at all times. I could feel the anxiety well up within me. During the first day of hiking I was preoccupied with trying to remember which animal it was, according to the brochure, that you backed away from slowly; which was the one where we were to huddle in a group and flail and make loud noises, and which was the one from which you just turned and ran like hell. I realized I just had to trust the people I was with.

This desert, this place at the very edge of the world, this place at the margins of inhabitable existence, this place that is mysteriously beautiful and decidedly dangerous, is a paradigm for the life into which we are baptized, baptism, the chief theme of this gospel....a life of beauty...a life of danger... an ambiguous life....a life of utter vulnerability....the desert is a place wherein life springs inexorably from the very rocks and stones themselves, and it is a place wherein life is tenuous and challenged and uncertain. One must trust one's friends in the desert, this desert life into which we are thrown.

In our Gospel text today, Mark, in just a few terse lines of Greek, lays out this call of ours as the Baptized. "You are my son, my beloved; I delight in choosing you. And the Spirit immediately threw Jesus out into the desert."

That is my take on the translation: The word for wilderness here means desert....we south Alabamians think of forests of pines and Hickories and Sweetgums and water oaks and savannahs and swamps as wilderness, but the word here clearly means desert...also the word drove...as in the Spirit drove Jesus into the desert, the word quite literally means to throw... and the word for well pleased means something like sheer delight....

These words of being loved chosen and sent are the essence of the life of faith. Jesus, of course, in this passage and throughout the Gospel of Mark is the model baptized, so we are latter day sons and daughters of God in whom God delights and in so choosing sends us into the desert....Jesus is who *we* are called to be. As he comes up out of the waters of baptism and witnesses the rending of the heavens...so do we as the baptized go down into the waters and rise with him...and see with enlightened eyes the possibility of God's justice and compassion let loose upon earth....the coming sacred egalitarian commonweal already setting its roots.... In the person of Jesus in Mark, the whole of Israel is reduced to one figure, he the paradigm of a faithful life of a people: This Jesus of Nazareth, the faithful one in the desert for the good of all the nations. He is the first-born, the paragon, the archetype of what the community of faith looks like. He is who we as people of God are called to be....do you say that is impossible?...that it is impossible for the community of faith to be like Jesus?... Listen to Jesus' very words; "You will be baptized as I am...you will drink the cup I drink!" as I am sent, so too are you sent." As Jesus is the lens through whom we see God...then Jesus is also the lens through whom God sees us: true humanity, and as humanity made in God's own image, it is our responsibility to be creative world changers...which is to live the life of the desert, to live in God's life.... God forever hanging out in the deserts of our world.

My sisters and brothers, in our baptisms, in our coming up out of the waters, it is now ours to read the opening heavens, and it is we who are immediately thrown out into the desert among the wild beasts of our world, upon the parched ground of injustice, amid the thirst for sanity and peace and dignity...It is we now who are, for forty days, in truth, a lifetime, in the desert being tried by the powers of evil, assayed, honed and transformed into who we are created to be....and that is no less than the bearers of the kingdom of God, no less than bearing the raised Christ Jesus himself to our world...and time is short, the need as Mark puts it is immediate... and things

are tenuous in the desert, and life in the desert trembles upon a fine line between salvation and extinction. If Baptism means nothing else, it means that we are among the chosen ones up for this challenge... The desert is at once the place wherein God makes promises to God's beloved as God did with the people of Israel at Sinai; and at once the place wherein God's beloved are tried and tested within an inch of our lives, a transformative maturing process for the good of the whole.

We are the beloved ones in whom God delights in choosing....To be the ones thrown, driven into the parched sands, the arid winds and isolation and degradation of our world, is to be the ones whose goodness God trusts. God trusts our goodness to be the bearers of God's promised kingdom waiting to be born. In our baptismal life, our lives nurtured within the community of faith, may we rise to this our call. Do we back away slowly from the injustice of our world? Do we turn and run from the forgotten and the lost, the non-persons who live at the world's edge...NO, We walk among them in Love, as Christ walked among them in Love, with the sure and certain knowledge that God is with us....because God loves us and because God delights in choosing us for this work....as God delights to love all to whom we are sent.

This life into which we are called, this desert life, this life on the world's edge is reality itself, stripped of illusion...a life of sorrow and joy....of suffering and healing; a beauty that embraces both dark and light bounded by love....a beauty we can trust....as God trusts us. As we are thrown into the desert, out onto the margins of our world let us know with courage that we are, like stars over a desert landscape, a part of God's vast, wheeling and gracious order which knows no end but justice and mercy, wholeness and abundance, dignity and love....as sure and as certain as the life that springs miraculously from the parched recesses of an ancient Texas desert.

I have read that in the utter silence of the desert that it is literally possible to hear one's own heartbeat....What must that be like? May our hearts beat as desert hearts, vulnerable hearts open to the infinite possibilities of God's creativity. May our hearts beat to the rhythm of the landscape we inhabit...a landscape of trembling beauty and possibility...Hearts at risk in a vulnerable landscape....Our world a landscape of vulnerable hearts to do the work of a vulnerable God....a vulnerability willing even unto the cross....a vulnerability that the world craves....as one craves water in the desert....a vulnerability that sets loose God's grace....a vulnerability that saves....Some say one is closer to God in a desert...so

when you find yourself there, as surely you will, trust that...trust that for the world's sake.