

Lent 1 Year C

“Jesus, full of the Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness”

The word here for wilderness in the Greek means desert...you never know about these translators...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; strange 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...life is so very poignant there and so is death.

That is the other 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. 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, a life requiring our giving ourselves over to the Spirit....a life of beauty....a life of danger....an ambiguous life....a life of utter vulnerability, open to possibility....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 led.

This account of Jesus' forty day sojourn appears in all three of the Synoptic Gospels, but is never mentioned in John. In Mark, in his terse style, immediately after Jesus is baptized, he, as the text puts it, is thrown out into the desert, is tempted by Satan; was with the wild animals and attended to by angels. Mark never mentions the three specific temptations of Satan, but Matthew and Luke do.

So far in Luke since the birth of Jesus we have been informed as to just who this Jesus is: First Simeon witnesses the circumcision and sees in this child a vision of the coming salvation of Israel and the nations. At his baptism he is declared by a voice from heaven as being the beloved son of God. Luke takes pains to trace his ancestry all the way back through the Davidic line all the way back to Adam. Luke is most intent on connecting Jesus' ancestry intimately to the royalty and prophetic tradition of Israel's history...So Luke presents us the new King, as it were, of Israel, the one to lead them into freedom, the one who will lead them out of oppression.... what the rulers of Israel have always supposed to have done....Contrasted to the disobedience of the followers of Moses throughout the Sinai experience, here Luke presents the obedient son.

So the narrative continues with Jesus being led into the desert...some say one can hear one's own heartbeat in the silence of the desert...one's senses, one's emotions are more alive in this beautiful and dangerous place... this place of utter vulnerability...this place that the Spirit throughout Israel's history has led them...so that they might listen to their hearts and hear about their identity...to hear about their true destiny. Jesus is in the desert for forty days so indeed any Jewish hearer of this passage would be reminded of Israel's forty year sojourn in the desert of Sinai...and of all the pitfalls and struggles they experienced there in the process of becoming God's own people.

Here Jesus is struggling with the same process...the process; or perhaps better said the awareness of who he is and what he is to do. The temptations of Satan serve as a foil by which Jesus discerns his call...in short he is not to serve self first; he is not to buy in to earthly power and the corruption that comes with it; and he is not to test the power of God but to walk humbly with God.

All this adds up to the call of the baptized...all who are filled with the power of the Spirit are to give themselves to the enacting of God's realm in earth...a realm governed by mercy, peace, justice and dignity for all...and Luke's other point here is that don't doubt that there will be resistance to

such a commonweal....so a brief excurses here on the figure of Satan. We don't talk about Satan much in the Episcopal church, but his role here in Luke is crucial I think...early on in the Jewish oral tradition Satan was one of the heavenly court...you remember his casual conversation with God about testing Job....then later in the Psalms and in the prophets, he becomes the accuser, holding up the sins of Israel before them...but later, after the brutal occupation of Israel by the Assyrians in the latter two centuries B.C.E. Satan becomes associated with corrupted imperial power. So for Luke there is a marked contrast between the way of the world, which in this world is the way of oppressive occupying empire, up and against the way of God....a decisive dynamic between the possibilities of good and the possibilities of evil.

Luke has already let us in on this vision of God's ways in earth earlier in Mary's song that precedes Jesus' birth...we are told what the ways of this world looks like as it is unfolding already: the abased are granted dignity, God will show mercy to the faithful from generation to generation, God has scattered the braggarts, the tyrants are put down, God is raising up the victimized, God is feeding the starving poor and giving them reason to live.

This is the life we must choose to serve, choose continually...and we will find ourselves most often in the desert...times when we must listen to our hearts amid the fear and danger and ambiguity...and acknowledge again the great beauty it is that we are called into such a life...Find a way to love the desert, brothers and sisters....until we come face to face with the reality of death and the illusory power it has over us, then we can't live...true life is the life of the Spirit, life that will engender life eternally from generation to generation...death is merely a chord in the same song, a song in major and minor key...the song that wheels the stars....the song of the desert places....the song of choices made for the good of the whole....the song of our destiny...when in the desert, friends of God, trust your fellow sojourners.... listen to your hearts, and you'll know who you are, and you'll know what to do, and you won't be afraid, and you will truly live.