

Lent I year C 2019

If you've never been to a desert... you should go. In my last year of seminary, Katharine and I had the opportunity to go to the Big Bend National Park in West Texas. We met friends in San Antonio, and headed west together on I-10 toward El Paso. I don't know if you know this: Texas is a big state. About seven hours from San Antonio one reaches Ft. Stockton... and then you head south toward the U.S. Mexico border. The Big Bend National park is situated along the Rio Grande River in the Chihuahuan desert. It is one of the most beautiful places on earth... but so unlike the lush green in which we live. Ancient mountain ranges, the Chisos and the Davis, stretch southward into Mexico... honed and carved by water, wind, and earthquake over millions of years. Igneous peaks jut out from the park's center; skeletal remains of a volcanic apocalypse occurring long before there was such a thing as human memory.... It is barren and quiet, as if some lesser god tried his hand at creating life and then at some point got frustrated and abandoned the project entire... And yet in this arid void there is an abundance of life. An irony to be sure. The brochure at the welcome station stated that there are four hundred and eighty species of animal life in the park, over 150 species of birds alone... and over three thousand species of plants.... There is the prehistoric ocotillo, looking like some life form transplanted from another galaxy; cacti of all

shapes and colors; and agave reaching in some cases one hundred feet toward heaven; when one opens the car door one can smell the acrid creosote in the air. And then there are coyotes, and mountain lions, and bears. I kept referring to the park brochure to remind myself of which species it was that you gathered in a group and flailed to frighten them off; and from which you just turned and ran like hell... and then the birds reeling indifferently to human presence, expertly surveying aloft the topographic mystery of it all. At night, without the lights of the city, one can see more stars than one can imagine, as if they were somehow closer.... And the river of gas, and ore, and metal we call the Milky Way, glowing and absolute, just as it always has been... and will be.

The experience was exhilarating... and disorienting. There is an anxious ambiguity engendered by the juxtaposition of beauty and danger in the desert... Life in the desert is teeming, but it is tenuous, fragile, and provisional. One, for safety's sake, has to pay closer attention in the desert..... So the desert is a fine metaphor for life as it surely is: beautiful and dangerous; exhilarating, and disorienting; incisively poignant and ambiguous. It's all there, the whole of it, when we're paying rapt attention.

The desert of course is the central metaphor of Israel's biblical history. The defining episode of their becoming a people is the sojourn in the desert of Sinai, after fleeing slavery under the oppressive rule of Pharaoh. They were tried in the desert wilds for forty years we are told in the Book of Exodus.... Their survival was uncertain to say the least... they were in the desert with only their faith in a God of the mountains, a loving God purported to be more powerful than the others; ... and they were there with each other.... Their quest was well-being and dignity and a land of their own.... They struggled, as human communities do, with the need for control, with arrogance, with cynicism, and doubts. Their purpose and their hopes were riddled with obstacles, and second-guessing.... But such is the way in the desert, when reality shifts like a mirage, like an oasis that never was. They entered the land of Canaan without their leader and mentor who died in the desert of Moab worn down by the rigor of the forty year journey. The desert takes its toll.

In our Gospel reading for today Luke is at his typological best. He looks to Israel's venerable history for a pattern. Remember, Luke is theologian, not historian. The famous story of Jesus being tested in the desert by the devil is a direct and obvious parallel to the saga of Israel in the Sinai desert. Israel is in the wilderness for forty years... Jesus is in the Judean desert for forty days. That's

typology... and just before this episode Luke takes great pains to trace Jesus' genealogy back through the patriarchs and prophets all the way back to Adam, the first man. So Luke is placing on the figure of Jesus the whole of Israel's biblical history.... Fashioning the universe in a ball, as T.S. Eliot puts it, and rolling it towards some overwhelming question. Their collective life is a cycle of being captive and set free; of wandering, and coming home... It has always been thus; and it has always been true in Israel's history that God raises up an anointed one who is full of God's Spirit, to lead the people into freedom, well-being, dignity, and peace, once again.

So by now you see the typological patterns here in this Gospel? Right? Mary's song, the so-called *Magnificat*, is strikingly reminiscent of Deborah's song of praise at the birth of Samuel.... The account of the Transfiguration is strikingly reminiscent of Moses' encounter with God on Mt. Sinai.... Jesus' feeding the five thousand is strikingly reminiscent of Elijah feeding the masses at Meribah.... Jesus exorcising the demon from the little boy of Samaria evokes the story of Elisha doing the same at Mt. Carmel. So Luke is describing a pattern here. The way I would put it is that God does not act according to plan.... God acts according to a pattern. Israel's biblical history is forged by one improvisation after the other. And that is how Love operates, not according to plan, but by a pattern.... Showing

compassion amid the random and daunting circumstances of life.... Effecting justice in the face of injustice.... Healing the sick and infirm who are isolated from their communities.... Breaking bread with the outcasts and the so-called least among us... binding up the mournful and the brokenhearted.... Raising the dead of our world to new life.... Scripture proclaims that God delivered Israel from their desert trials... but God can't do God's work without the community... if we forsake each other, if we forsake community, God is rendered powerless; because Love needs flesh and blood.

So what do we, at last, make of our reading today? Jesus we are told is filled with the Spirit. An Important theme for Luke. He is the new one. He is the 'type' who will save his people. And of course the Gospel writers equate Jesus, the one, with the movement he has founded, the community. What is this new way ahead given new circumstances, a new Sitz em Leben?... well, it is very similar, of the same pattern, to what the people of Israel have been taught over their history: Practice hospitality; welcome the stranger; receive the resident alien as if he were your own family; visit the sick; visit people in prison; do justice, love mercy; practice humility; take care of the poor and the widow, and the orphan; establish community with people different from you.... Love in short.

And then the tension, the drama, the pathos of this reading, as is the tension of the Gospel in its entirety, is that the way of Love will be opposed.... The way of Love teems with life, but it is fragile, easily bruised.... Another aspect to Israel's biblical history is that their freedom never lasts all that long... as soon as they enter the land of Canaan they are beset by the powerful Philistines... the Monarchy peaks with David, the first monarch, and then it is progressively downhill ever since... until Judea is overrun by the Persians, and a substantial segment of the population is deported to Babylon.... The scribes of Hebrew scripture argue that it is Israel's disobedience that is their undoing.... I would say that it is their failure to pay attention... Here Luke is looking at the great question again... How do we as a people move forward, as God promised we would; How shall the world be restored?... what shall we do different given yet another chance? How do we negotiate this desert life, both beautiful and dangerous?... And that is what this testing in the desert is all about. Luke gives us a clue about the chief things that would lead to our undoing... the things that would undermine the community, and doom God's project of Love to failure.

There are three tests in our passage, not temptations, tests. The first is: turn these stones into bread so that you can eat... the second is to be in league with the powers of the world... and the third is to test God's power and

solidarity.... So three things that would oppose and disorient us in the desert.

First, the illusion of self-sufficiency... We are meant for community. When in the desert we trust our friends for our survival and sustenance... second, the lust for power and control. Power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely, as Lord Acton puts it. Wealth and power will eat us alive.... And third, arrogance.

That we would presume to play God... Luke is talking about the un-submitted ego. That if we live for ourselves alone, if we buy the illusion of self-sufficiency, then we are about the means of our undoing. The way ahead.... The way of Jesus, is about sacrifice for the greater good... watch out for the illusion, the mirage of self-sufficiency; watch out for our love of wealth and power; keep arrogance at bay, practice humility through the means of sacrifice.

This passage occurs just after Jesus' baptism.... As the baptized we are led by the Spirit into the desert, led by the Spirit into a reality that is life itself.... Mark's account of Jesus' trial is more to the point. He says we are flung by the Spirit into the desert. The desert is extreme; it is not comfortable. It is challenging. It takes courage and perseverance, and you have to pay close attention. We live as people of faith in the extreme and random iterations of ambiguity and trial. We live at the nexus of beauty and danger; we stand between the dark and the light in Love... Love the very Spirit of God; a God come down from the mountains to be

among God's people. We stand in opposition to the lesser gods of self-sufficiency, and power, and arrogance. Our sojourn in the desert, our journey in life matters not just for us, but for the world God loves... and we don't survive the desert on our own. We have the help and solidarity of each other, and the help and solidarity of all who choose such a beautiful and dangerous journey. If you've never been to a desert... you should go.