

Lent I Year C 2025

If you've never been to a desert; you should go. It is said that in the still silence of the desert, one can literally hear one's heartbeat. In my senior year of seminary, Katharine and I travelled with friends to the Big Bend National Park in West Texas, which is in the northern part of the Chihuahuan desert. Our trip there is still so very prominent in my memory. What I remember most about the desert was its stark ambiguity... by that, I mean, that on the one hand the desert is arid and barren and intimidating, but on the other, it is full of life, mysterious, beautiful.... It is full of life that has adapted to its oppressive environment over the eons. There's plant life that doesn't exist anywhere else on earth: ocotillo, sage brush, cacti... there is a persistent smell of creosote in the air. One has to pay closer attention in the desert... keep a supply of water on hand... watch out for scorpions, listen for rattlesnakes, watch one's footing. I remember being so very overwhelmed by the beauty of it all, and then also feeling anxious and disoriented. The vast and timeless landscape seemed as if some lesser god had fashioned a creation, and then got frustrated and left it alone. And yet it is so beautiful... mysterious.... Majestic. At night, far from the incandescent light of the cities, one can see the sweep of the Milky Way. The canopy of heaven seems so very close. Orion on his interminable quest; the Pleiades huddled in mysterious sorority. It seems that in the desert, perhaps because of its mute austerity; its mute authenticity; its stoic silence; its danger, that one is closer to the workings of things, as if the ancient rudiments of earth, its mechanism, its purpose, are there for the teaching. Complacency has no place in the desert. A desert is serious business.

The desert, of course, is the central metaphor of Israel's biblical history. These are a desert people. 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 wild God of the mountains, a loving God purported to be more powerful than the other desert gods; ...and they were there with each other in a profound solidarity of survival.... Their quest was well-being and dignity, and a land of their own upon which to settle.... 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 desert 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 premise. 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, a judge who will deliver his people from the Philistines.... The account of the Transfiguration is strikingly reminiscent of Moses' encounter with God on Mt. Sinai.... Jesus' feeding the five thousand evokes the storied memory of Elijah feeding the masses at Meribah.... Jesus exorcising the demon from the little boy of Samaria reminds the hearer of the story of Elisha doing the same at Mt. Carmel. So Luke is describing a pattern here. A Pattern. 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: freedom, trial, nurture, healing... that's the pattern, not a plan. Because one must improvise in the desert.... 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 and dignity in the face of injustice and shame. Love's pattern.

So there is a lot going on in our reading for this morning. I've mentioned the typology connecting Jesus to the tradition. This is also a commissioning of the baptized. Jesus's sojourn in the desert takes place immediately after his baptism. For Luke, as in the other

Gospels, Jesus is the personification of the movement. In other words, what Jesus is described as doing... that's what the baptized are commissioned to do. And in the case of this particular passage, what we are not to do.

Jesus is tested in the desert by Satan we are told... that mysterious legendary figure, the one in whose hands God entrusted the life of Job to be tested.... The legend of Job belongs to the oral tradition, written down probably in the fourth century B.C.E. But in Luke, written in the late first Century C.E., some five hundred years later, the figure of Satan has taken on new meaning. New Testament scholar Walter Bruggemann proposes that Satan represents the emperor of Rome... that the ruler of the empire becomes the personification of evil. Jesus will later proclaim that Satan, in the face of the Gospel will fall like lightning, again harkening to Mary's song that the princes of this world will be brought down from their thrones. Jesus is being tested here by the allure of the status quo. He's being tempted to sell out to the ways of empire. To keep quiet. His life, Israel's life, hangs in the balance between illusion and true sustainability. After all, this is in the desert wherein life hangs by a thread.

There are three tests here that Luke presents as warnings: First is the illusion of self-sufficiency: Our habit of looking out for number one. Second, the seduction of power and control, and last, the warning against arrogance... that is to say, using God for one's own purposes. In short, Luke is warning us against self-interest; and he is exhorting us to the radical allegiance to the Gospel, its demand for sacrifice in the face of empire.

Some things never change. We, good people, live in a world of empire. As we speak, we see the corruption it engenders manifest in the undermining of our very democracy. We are seeing the means and ends of empire in Ukraine. We have seen it in our role in Iraq and Afghanistan. We've seen it in the genocide of native peoples in our own land; the genocide in Gaza, funded by our own U.S. tax dollars. We see it in the systemic racism that infects our culture and its institutions. We still believe in the false god of manifest destiny. We see it in our blind allegiance to capitalism. There are many gods in the desert.

We are called to live another way, good people. We claim the wild God of Love. To be a follower of Jesus, to thrive in the desert, is to be counter-cultural: To be present in thought and word and action amid the wiles of the desert. The church, tragically, for centuries, has acquiesced to the ways of culture. We have given ourselves over to the myth of privilege, and the survival of the fittest. Jesus calls us to embrace those whom the empire leaves out; those whom we deem as weak, those who are different; we are to welcome the unwelcomed. God's world order will not begin from the seats of power. God's reign will begin by the welcome of others into our households, into our schools, into our churches, into our economy; into shared abundance. It will happen from the ground up. God's work begins in the alleyways and streets and housing projects, in relationships, and perhaps most of all, in simple acts of welcome. God's work begins in the desert where life hangs by a thread. God's work is not the work of a person, but the work of a people who have given themselves to the practice of sacrifice; and a profound and risky allegiance to the truth. We're not going to change the empires of our world; they will alas, persist, one

after another... but we can love the people who live under their oppressive aegis. At our baptisms, sisters and brothers we are called into the desert. Our lives belong to its disorienting and ambiguous and barren vastness, the place wherein life is so very fragile and tenuous; where it hangs by a thread; but so full of life's potential and beauty and mystery. The mechanism that turns the earth on her axis is Love. That is the teaching of the desert wilderness.

It is said that one can hear one's heartbeat in the still silence of the desert.... Listen to your heart of hearts. It beats only for Love... If you've never been to a desert... you should go.