

“In Our Wilderness”

Luke 4:1-13

February 14, 2016

The Rev. Dr. Mark W. Jennings

We were in our second week in the Holy Land two years ago, and we had spent a very long day on the bus, beginning in Bethlehem and driving down to Jericho, one of the oldest cities in human history, quickly moving on to the Dead Sea and then to Masada, site of the last Jewish resistance to the Romans during the first century rebellion. Then finally as the sun was setting we drove through the Judean wilderness toward our nighttime stop at Arad, a small Israeli city on the southern frontier. After an incredibly busy day my colleagues began to nod off as we drove through the featureless southern desert, lots of rounded hills and switchbacks as we gained in altitude leaving the Dead Sea, the lowest spot on earth and returning toward sea level. But as they dropped off, I began to perk up. Looking out the window of the small bus I saw the wilderness unfold before me. No trees, no towns, sparse vegetation, an occasional Bedouin nomad with his flock of goats and the fading light as the sun descended toward the distant Mediterranean. And I began to feel the presence of God's Spirit stronger than I had felt him anywhere else in the Holy Land. Not in Bethlehem where Jesus was born, not in Nazareth where he grew up, not in Capernaum where he taught and healed, not in Shechem where Abraham and Jacob heard the voice of God thousands of years ago. Not any of those places, but here where there was nothing. In the wilderness.

It was in wilderness like this that Jacob first heard the voice of God telling him that he would always be with him. It was in wilderness like this that Moses fled to after killing an Egyptian, where God spoke to him on the mountain. It was in wilderness like this that the people of Israel wandered for years after leaving Egypt, waiting to hear from God. It was in wilderness like this that David ran away to save himself from Saul. It was wilderness like this that seems to have been the home of John the Baptist. And it was wilderness like this that Jesus was led to after his baptism.

I almost wanted to get out of the bus and walk the last ten miles to Arad, but as a naive American I figured that wouldn't be a good idea. But I wondered if I had whether I would have heard the voice of God. Or maybe the temptation of the devil. Both tend to happen in the wilderness.

You all know the story of the temptation and probably have heard numerous sermons on the temptations of Jesus. He was tempted to make bread so he wouldn't be hungry, tempted to seek worldly power, tempted to lead by spectacle rather than by faith. Now I don't know about you, but I'm not really tempted very much in those ways. I can't command stones to become bread, I don't have great political aspirations and I don't really want people to be amazed at something miraculous that I do. But if you think about it, the temptations that Jesus faces are not really all that different from ours. What he is tempted to do is to take the easy way. He is tempted to be selfish. He's tempted to be more concerned about himself than he is about others. And he's not tempted with bad things. "The source of our temptations is almost always our own legitimate, normal, natural desires (note James 1:14-15). The desire for food, sexual intimacy, approval of others is not from the devil. These are wholesome, normal, legitimate desires. How do they become sinful?"

Jesus was hungry and of course needed something to eat. So why not say a word and turn the stone to bread? The temptation was that Jesus use his miraculous powers to provide for himself. Jesus chose a pattern of life wherein he would always use his God-given powers for others, never for himself. He healed the sick. He opened blind eyes. He raised the dead. His power was always used for others, not for himself."¹ How many of us would have done that? That does tell us something about how God wants us to live our lives—not for ourselves but for others. One of the seeming contradictions of the fulfilled life is that we are most fulfilled, most ourselves when we are not thinking about ourselves very much at all. God has given each of us, has given our community, a multitude of gifts. But how are those gifts used? Do we always look for what is most advantageous to us? Do I always want to come out on top? Do I use my gifts so I can look good, or for the benefit of others? Do I use the powers that

¹ Taylor, Barbara Brown. *The Wilderness Exam*.

God has given me—physical, financial, mental, spiritual, or whatever—for myself, or for the well-being of others? That's a good question for those about to be ordained and installed as officers in this church. If you listen, one of the questions that they are about to answer is whether they will seek to serve the people with energy, intelligence, imagination and love. Serve the people. Serve you and me. That's what we are all called to do. That's what love calls us to do, that's what Christ calls us to do.

But I was most interested in this passage that it happens in the wilderness. Do you spend much time in the wilderness? Me neither. The wilderness is not some place that we seek out very much. It is often a place we end up in without intending to be there. Where is the wilderness for you? The Episcopal preacher Barbara Brown Taylor says that each one of us comes to the wilderness in our lives. “Maybe it just looked like a hospital waiting room to you, or the sheets on a cheap motel bed after you got kicked out of your house, or maybe it looked like the parking lot where you couldn't find your car on the day you lost your job. It may even have been a kind of desert in the middle of your own chest, where you begged for a word from God and heard nothing but the wheezing bellows of your own breath.

Wildernesses come in so many shapes and sizes that the only way you can really tell you are in one is to look around for what you normally count on to save your life and come up empty. No food. No earthly power. No special protection--just a Bible-quoting devil and a whole bunch of sand.”²

It is in these moments, when we are not surrounded by all the stuff that usually takes our attention, it is these moments when we feel an emptiness in ourselves, that we are most tempted to fill it with something, anything. I can't tell you what it is for you—food, money, shopping, acclaim, alcohol, anger at someone else, blame, envy, sleep. Something that makes you believe that you're not alone in the wilderness. But nothing does really fill it, does it? Not for long anyway. It's still there that emptiness, that hole waiting to be filled and it is the wilderness that makes us more aware of it than any place else. But it is also in the wilderness that we just might be able to hear the voice of God, speaking to that emptiness, speaking in that emptiness that only God can fill.

² Taylor, Barbara Brown. *The Wilderness Exam*.

It is during the time of Lent that we are invited to seek out the wilderness, to seek out a place that we can hear the voice of God in the quiet, in the dark. Jesus sought the wilderness not just to be tempted, but to hear God's voice clearly. Where does that happen for you? It may have happened in the past in a time of trouble, when you felt alone or abandoned, and I'm sure you don't want to feel that way again. This is the story of Jesus' temptation. But remember he was tempted another time, at the very end. Remember that the last temptation of Jesus was in the Garden of Gethsemene on the night before he was arrested. He was tempted to be selfish for the last time, to not go the way of the cross. And while he was tempted, he asked his disciples to stay awake and pray with him. But they fell asleep.

Have you even been here in the sanctuary at night? Have you ever sat in here with most of the light off, with no one else here, with just the sounds of the night? This year on Maundy Thursday we are going to have a prayer vigil in which we ask members of our community to sit and pray as Jesus asked his disciples to do with him in the garden. We'll give you a chance to sit in here and pray for an hour during the night remembering that Jesus asked his disciples, "Could you not wait with me even one hour?" We will try to answer him, Yes we can. We will have someone here all through the night, an hour at a time, praying in the quiet. Maybe it will feel like the wilderness. Maybe this will be our wilderness. The wilderness where we see connections between us and nature, between us and one another, between us and our creator. Maybe we will even hear the voice of God.