

First Sunday in Lent 2019

Church of the Advent

Luke 4:1-13

Jesus and Satan Walked into the Desert

Our gospel story today of the encounter between Jesus and the Tempter in the desert is a familiar one, told in some version in all four gospels. Our lectionary offers us one version or another of *Jesus and Satan walked into the desert* every year during Lent. For a long time I heard this story held up as a model for resistance of temptation and sin, but after a while that just didn't hold water. First, I am uncomfortable with images of Satan the Tempter that give him human characteristics, and second, my secret rebellious heart has always asked why *Jesus*--freshly baptized in the Jordan and reported to be free from sin--who had just left home and all that was familiar and comfortable for a ministry that would end in his death--*why* did *Jesus* have to go into *the desert*, of all places, right out of the gate? Being from the Deep South, where the horizon is just an idea beyond an ever present canopy of trees, I have always found deserts disconcerting. When I have visited the American West, with its vast expanses of land, there is a geographic anxiety that wells up in me that has something to do with being exposed and unprotected. The desert is a part of the world that seems naked and threatening, because the forests are missing. Now you may think that South Georgia pine forests are nothing to write home about, but during a Southern Summer, shade is shade.

So I admit this is partly where some of my anxiety about this story comes from, making me already feel sorry for Jesus--wandering about, exposed to the sun, the wind, and the cold nights, and drinking water out of sandy wells--because anyone knows you cannot survive 40 days without water. He would have been hungry, weak, and possibly a bit delirious, with dry

and blistered skin--at least on his face and hands. What was he *doing* all that time alone? Did he walk around or conserve his energy? Traveling from point A to point B, or lost? Did he look for the shade of boulders or caves or prickly plants? Was he praying? Was it his idea or was he pushed there by the Spirit? Did he think he might die? How did he know when it was time to head home, to seek nourishment and restoration and then to begin his ministry of gentleness and healing to God's people?

So as if it wasn't a stressful enough experience just to be there, Jesus was confronted by a liar--someone who offered to help him, to comfort him, to relieve his suffering...*for a price*. At first the offer was simple—bread for *sustenance*. Jesus turned him down. The irony of the Tempter offering to create bread out of a rock was seen later, when Jesus would feed 5000 with a few loaves and fish. Next came the offer of *power*—over everything and everybody. This would have enabled him to throw the occupying Romans out of Judea, boot out the corrupt Jewish authorities who colluded with them, and restore good and abundant life to the people he was about to begin teaching and serving. It would be quite a short cut—and no need to die at the end of his journey. The rub was that the cost of the that promised power would be the loss of the power given to him by God, and to Jesus that price was too high. Finally came the offer of *protection*, challenging the faith Jesus had in the angels who surrounded him and attended to him.

The Tempter appealed to a capacity for deep anxiety that lives in all humans, touching the fear of pain and loss that can lead us to do things not always in the best interests of ourselves and others. Jesus answered this final offer with confidence. He could not be driven to jump off

that cliff only to provide a miracle to impress the Tempter, or to prove to himself that his ultimate destiny was securely in God's mercy and attention.

The story then ends with the Tempter leaving, but with a hint that though this particular conversation was over, the relationship was not. The challenges to the life and ministry of Jesus would not be so direct in his coming years, but would be acted out through other people challenging his origins, his power, his authority. Even when surrounded by crowds, Jesus would often feel alone, as if in a desert wilderness. Eventually the faithfulness of Jesus to the will of God would cost him his life, but only so that God's power could be revealed in the destruction of death itself through the Resurrection.

So why has this story of Jesus and Satan in the desert resonated for 2000 years? Because everyone who lives on this earth has been in the desert. Whether called or pushed there, we know what it feels like to be alone, with the feeling that there is no one close by to give us the *sustenance* we need, the *power* to change our circumstances, or *protection* against the perils of pain, loss, disappointment, or failure. Sometimes deserts are broken relationships, illness or injury. Sometimes they are situations in life we are powerless to control—loss of a job, a mortgage foreclosure, a bad choice or mistake that comes back to bite us. Sometimes the desert is depression, grief, or the loss of dignity that comes with aging or disability. Sometimes it is the isolated place of having been wounded by others, or war and its irrevocable memories. Everyone has been or will travel to the desert in their lifetimes. And in that desert place, with the taste of sand and sweat in our mouths, the Tempter works to get our attention. When things are bad, the fastest and easiest way out of our trouble is always the greatest temptation.

When we are in pain we long for *sustenance, power* and *protection*. We seek distraction in the form of comfort food, alcohol, entertainment, and company. We seek control by working our power plays in the workplace, the community, the home. We obsess about our security with the acquisition of alarm systems, weapons, and walls at our borders. All of these things come more easily than standing firm on the conviction that *one does not live by bread alone, that we are to worship the Lord our God and serve only him, and not put the Lord our God to the test*. It is harder to act like we believe that no matter what happens, *the angels will bear us up, so that we will not dash our foot against a stone*. Better we take things into our own hands, and if the Tempter has a good suggestion as to how to do that, more power to him, for surely these things he offers are reasonable, and have no relation to sin.

So when was the last time you were in the desert, and did you see the Tempter? Do you remember meeting the angels there? I can say I have met them both. The Tempter might have good timing when it comes to our vulnerability, but the angels are invariably in the right place at the right time, saying just the right thing on a terrible day or doing just the right thing in a terrible circumstance, offering the grace of assurance that God lives in the wilderness with us. God has *always* been in the desert--as he was with Abraham, with Jacob, with Moses, with the Israelites, and with Jesus. If the Spirit of God is drawing us into the desert, it is not for the purpose of being tempted, but for the letting go of the noise and distractions of life--the real temptations--so that we can actually hear the quiet still voice of God speaking to us through the sounds of angels' wings, sustaining us, protecting us, and giving us the power we need to be angels to one another.

This is why we tell this story of Jesus in the desert each year—not to warn us away from the near occasions of sin in the league of chocolate or Netflix. Whatever our guilty pleasures

are, they are subject to the title of *sin* only when they control us, or distract us from our deepest longing for right relationship with God and others through Jesus Christ. Rather the story of the Jesus and Satan in the desert is meant to remind us that the grace of God can be found in even desert places, even in times of pain and distress, fear, anxiety and loss. And to remind us that the angels will always be there to attend us. AMEN

