

SERMON FOR YEAR C, THE FIRST SUNDAY OF LENT

LUKE 4:1-13

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“”

Having heard what we have just heard –

The story of Jesus' being thrust into the wilderness and subjected to these temptations –

The only response we can really make is the one we already made:

To say, “Praise to you, Lord Christ.”

When we've run out of erudition and understanding;

When the words of all the commentators throughout the centuries

Are read and come to their end;

When we try to wrap our tongues and minds equally around this event and come up dry:

Then we revert to the only proper stance,

The only stance we can assume on a day like today:

To take off our shoes in recognition that we are in holy territory,

And to prostrate ourselves in awe and wonder –

As individuals and as a community –

With urgency, with reverence, with hearts bared –

Not scraping and bowing and in penitence because *it's just what we do*,

But because we have been shown a wonderful and dangerous thing,

In the power of God's Spirit;

And we find, as the writer of Deuteronomy found in the offering of the first-fruit,

That apart from this wonderful thing, we have no life.

Jesus Christ, we say, is our north star,

And on days like today we know why.

We know why in a deep way, but can only hint at it, around the edges,

With our insufficient words.

We're back in the wilderness now –

Not only with Jesus, today, in this Scripture,

But in our lives, on our Christian calendar, in Lent.

We're back, now, in that place of deepest penitence,

Where we subject ourselves not to penitence for its own sake,

But only so that we might be hollowed out, turn hungry and empty,

And something useful for God's kingdom made of us.

My colleague John noted this week a terrible irony:

That though we have entered into Lent as a kind of wilderness,

We do so from the perspective of a people living in a land flowing with milk and honey.

Does that make Lent harder or easier for you?

Obviously more of us are doing with less these days;

Nevertheless, is it a burden to make a wilderness journey

With such relative extravagance so easily at hand?

I know it is for me, if only for this reason:
When I am warm and housed and well-fed,
And have easy access to things like transportation and medicine,
Then I forget about where my life comes from.
I grow sleepy and forgetful,
And I *spiritualize* the desert and fasting and the bombardment of temptation;
I turn all these things into nice, preacherly metaphors,
And reduce Lent into manageable bits.

It becomes a losing game to try and reconcile myself to Jesus' desert,
Which was, after all, real and really dangerous.
No food. Probably very little or nothing in the way of shelter.
He just prayed and wandered, dizzy from hunger.

Forty days he heard the wind, felt the sting of the sun,
Did his best to avoid rabid beasts and stinging insects.

My life is so comfortable by comparison that I don't know what to do with this,
So I don't do *anything* with it.
I can't look at it.
I can't be bothered to identify with Jesus; compared to me, this guy's Superman.
I wouldn't last a week in a place like that.

We need to hear this, be confronted with it, and understand
That it's an issue we won't ever really resolve.
We cannot know what he knew.

But that doesn't mean we aren't looking at stones and wishing for bread.
It doesn't mean that we wouldn't like a little slice of the earthly kingdom,
And a bit of power for ourselves.
It doesn't mean that we wouldn't mind putting God to the test –
Oh, just a little test – just to prove how faithful God is to us.

How we long for pleasure, power, esteem, affection!

Sisters and brothers, the reality of the human condition is
That if any of our life *is* a test
(And I would be very cautious about how to use that language),
We've pretty much failed it already.
Give us food, we eat it; a chance at power, we jump for it; a little love, we take it.

So what *does* the Christ seek to show us by *denying* these things?
That we're worthless wretches who can't be trusted?
That he's better than us?

That's bad religion – bad religion being preached all over this country this morning,
And quite beside the point.

The purpose of Lent is not really “betterment.”
It’s not really “denial.”
It’s to increase in relationship to God,
 In our capacity to trust,
 In our knowledge *of* God,
 In the opening of our selves *to* God.

And it’s also to learn, with both our bodies and our minds,
 The story of a deep mercy that takes us all the way to the place of death and beyond.

Lent ultimately demonstrates not our glory, but our failings, our frailty, our mortality.
If we walk faithfully through this season and Holy Week,
 Then we cannot help but be confronted by the reality that we are finite creatures.
You cannot do Lent right; you can only do it wrong,
 And thanks be!

And all of that may not sound like good news ...
 But it’s *very* good news.
For if these things are true, then we’re not on our own!
God is with us; God knows our experience:
 And not in words, but in the world of the tangible, and the real.

And not only in the lives of us as individuals, but this gathered community as well.
Jesus has walked the pilgrim way.
Let’s follow him now.

So let us trust this thing.
Let us lean into it.

Into God’s hands we commend our spirits.