

**Christ Church, Georgetown**  
**Sermon, Lent 1, March 5, 2017**  
**The Rev. Timothy Cole**

I don't know if we have any Canadians present this morning but I do know that we have some members of the congregation who have strong links with Canada. I remember being given a great tip over in the UK. This chap said to me, "If you ever meet anyone with a North American accent abroad, always ask them if they are Canadian. If they are American, they will just say, "No I am American and won't be in the least offended. But if they are Canadian they will be so pleased that you got that right that you will have won them over as your best friend for life straight away!"

Back in the 1990s, I remember reading that Canada came first in the World Quality of Life Index.

I didn't find that very surprising. I have only been to the wild parts of Canada west of Calgary in Alberta on exercise with the Army, but many people in Scotland spoke of considering emigrating to Canada because it was supposed to be such a great Quality of Life up there. Indeed, I see that Canada still tops that index today.

What was very surprising about this piece though, was that, at the same time, the writer said that Canada also had one of the highest levels of depression of any developed nation. 1 in 5 people in the population were supposed to be formally treated for it at that time. I don't see them up there now, in fact I think Britain and the US, are higher than Canada now on the depression index, but the shock was just that combination - highest quality of life and highest incidence of depression in the developed world. How could that be?

Anyone who has listened to the great Canadian song writer Leonard Cohen might not be quite so surprised I suppose (he was the ultimate morose listening for all depressed students in my day!) but it is strange isn't?

I don't pretend to have an answer as such but I wonder if geography is the key. I remember flying over the north of Canada on a very long flight from the UK to Belize in central America (the British military flights couldn't safely go straight across the Atlantic at that time so we went a very long way round.) I sat at the window for an hour looking out on the northern

Canadian landscape on a bright clear day. We must have traveled 450 or 500 miles in that time and, looking down, I did not see a single road, a single house or bridge or any sign whatsoever of humanity. It was a complete and utter wilderness.

I don't know what experience you have had of the wilderness but I have spent some time in these places. Hot deserts, cold deserts, oceans, empty places where the nearest real human settlements are many many miles away.

“Join the Army and see the world” they said. What they didn't say was that it would be those parts of the world that nobody else in their right mind would ever want to go to!

If you have ever spent time in these kind of places you will know that the wilderness is double edged.

At the heart of it there is a rare and precious beauty and a wild and all consuming peace. After a while you feel like you are being washed clean and set free from everything that holds you.

Like Thomas Grey in his Elegy, you are made privy to what no-one else sees;

Full many a gem of purest ray serene  
The dark unfathom'd caves of ocean bear:  
Full many a flower is born to blush unseen,  
And waste its sweetness on the desert air.”

But you are there and you do see it blush and the fact that no-one else does, makes it all the more wonderful.

There is another side to it though. One that you only really see if you have to live out in the wilderness for any length of time. Its beauty is hard edged and you soon begin to see just how hard it would be to survive there for long without the supports of the modern world. More than that, you begin to find that the emptiness, peaceful and beautiful as it is, also summons up in you the most basic struggles of existence. There are only three presences there in the emptiness. You, God and the devil, the darkness that you bring with you. Before very long you are confronted with your inner life with all it's temptations, fears and uncertainties. That is why the Desert Fathers, the

early figures of the monastic movement, sought the desert. They sought it not as an escape, but as a place to do battle with themselves and the Devil and to seek the purest presence of God.

As we think of Jesus led by God's Holy Spirit out into the wilderness today at the beginning of this Holy season of Lent we might think of the wildernesses that we have known, both physical as well as mental, and spiritual. They all have these twin elements of beauty and struggle I think. We have all known the mental and spiritual wildernesses of life.

The wilderness of grief, the wilderness of loneliness, the wilderness of failure, the wilderness of broken relationship or unrequited love, the wilderness of loss of purpose or meaning in our lives.

Each have their own temptations and struggles and each have some element of beauty that is mostly hidden from us, but which is there nonetheless.

The wilderness of lost love, for instance, makes us feel that all beauty has fled from the world. Robert Burns in his poem "Ye banks and Braes o' Bonnie Doon" expresses just this sense of loss cutting him off from the world as he looks sadly out on a sunny day by the bank of the river Doon which he loves;

"Ye banks and braes o' bonnie Doon  
How ye can bloom so fresh and fair  
How can ye chant ye little birds  
And I sae weary fu' o' care"

In this wilderness the world seems to lose all color and meaning.

And yet, even when a loved one dies, in all our grief is hidden one most precious thing. We have lost someone we love but our love for them remains. Indeed, it lies at the heart of the wilderness of our sorrow, still noble and pure and true even as it is surrounded by pain. The struggle is how to how go on and honor that love. The temptation is to give way to cynicism or bitterness or despair.

When it comes to the temptations of Jesus we are looking at this morning we see that they are different from our temptations. His wilderness is not

one we will ever know. His temptations are to do with what should be done with Divine and supernatural power. Make stones into bread, throw yourself off the pillar of the Temple, receive the homage and subservience of all the nations of the world. These are not temptations that you and I are ever going to face.

And yet, in general terms, the wilderness and the struggle are very well known to us. So is the fact of temptation and so is the beauty that lies hidden there.

The most precious thing, the beauty, that stays with Jesus all through his struggles with the Devil and himself is his overwhelming and unshakable sense of the presence and majesty and reality of God. "Man does not live by bread alone but by every word that comes from the mouth of God, Do not put the Lord your God to the test. Worship the Lord your God and serve only him."

In every wilderness we find ourselves in, that precious thing, that beauty of God and what God has made in us, also remains.

In most wildernesses of life, we are tempted to despise ourselves and others around us and even God. We are tempted to cheat or lie or steal - to make stones into bread. We are tempted to indulge in the cheap stunt and take shortcuts to success - to make it look like we are throwing ourselves off the pinnacle of the Temple while in fact, we have only jumped a few feet onto a hidden ledge. And we are tempted to bow down and worship the Devil in his various smooth and attractive forms as he sells us his great lie that all we have to do is sacrifice a little of our integrity here or our humanity there and he will make us happy and our lives full.

The real nature of Temptation is testing, something we know only too well. Exams at school and college, big meetings, interviews and presentations at work and all the tests of character that we find on sports fields, battle fields and all the other fields of human endeavor, domestic and public. We fail some of course. Some repeatedly, but we pass others and we can always try again.

The tests we find in the wildernesses of life and that Jesus faced in his wilderness, are not one offs. He had to pass those tests again; as when he has to tell Peter to “get thee behind me Satan” as he offers Jesus an easier way than the cross or, in Gethsemane, when the burden of that final test is so great that he bleeds with it.

Whatever personal wilderness we may find ourselves in this Lent, may we, like Jesus, hold on to the beauty that lies at the heart of the struggle to survive there. The beauty of the knowledge of a love that fills the vast emptiness, and the beauty of the life he has put in each one of us that grows in quality with every test that is faced and overcome.