

Lent 1 – Year B

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Christ Church, Georgetown

February 21, 2021

In the name of God. Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Have you ever noticed how many Bible stories take place in the desert or the wilderness? Here are just a few. Jacob wrestles with an angel in the desert. Moses, in the wilderness, encounters God as a voice from a burning bush. Elijah is driven into the desert where he meets God and confronts his own insignificance. Moses and the Israelites wander around the desert for forty years where they forge a covenant with God and receive the Ten Commandments. John the Baptist emerges from the wilderness full of God's prophetic power, heralding the coming of the messiah. And in today's Gospel, Jesus is driven out into the desert for 40 days to undergo a series of temptations.

Throughout the Bible, the desert is always a place of apparent contradictions. It is, most of the time, a dry and arid place. It is bare and forbidding and hostile. It is a place where people go hungry, where bandits wait, where demons and wild animals are encountered. It is a place where people are often left exposed and unprotected. Yet, at the same time, the wilderness is also a place where God's people go to find refuge, and, more importantly, where God can be encountered. Throughout the Bible, the desert is understood as a strange place where people face the very worst

and sometimes find the very best, where they encounter demons, confront themselves, and often discover God.¹

Frederick Buechner once said, "The Bible is not first of all a book of moral truth. ... It (is) instead a book of truth about the way life is." I think he is right. The Bible tells us about *who* God is and *how* life is. In this sense, the desert plays such a prominent role in scripture because, let's face it, life is full of deserts. Your life, my life, all our lives, are punctuated by our own times in the wilderness, our own desert experiences. These are the times when we feel lost and alone, when life feels barren and dry, and we cannot seem to find our way. These are the times when we struggle with loss, sickness, heartbreak and worry. If the mountain top experiences in the Bible are metaphors for all that goes right in our lives, then the desert stories are metaphors for all those times when life goes bust, when we are at our lowest, when we wonder how we will ever make it through.

I know there are those of you out there who are, at this very moment, right smack in the middle of your own desert experience. You have a child who is ill, you are in the midst of a long battle with an illness, your job is coming to an end and you don't know where the next job will come from, your marriage is unhappy in spite of how much you love each other, you are struggling with depression that won't loosen its grip, you find yourself alone at a point in your life you never imagined possible, you are watching your spouse fade away and you feel trapped by the realities of aging. Life is never a question of "if" we will find ourselves in the desert. It is only a question of "when" will we find ourselves there.

But if scripture tells us how life *is*, then we can take comfort in the fact that even in the wilderness God is with us. In the wilderness, Jacob wrestled with his own ego, his own selfishness, his own destructive pride, but God stayed with him and at the end of that experience, he emerged as a new man, a

¹ David Conner, K.C.V.O.; at stgeorges-windsor.org.

man named Israel who would become the father of a great people. The Israelites wandered in the desert for four decades fighting among themselves, falling prey to false idols, distrusting the God who rescued them from Egypt, and pretty much driving Moses crazy. But, God cared for them every step of the way - providing water from a rock when they were thirsty and manna from heaven when they were starving. God never left them and when the desert came to an end, they came into their own as a people and as a nation. In our lesson for today, no sooner does Jesus receive his baptism from John and hear God proclaim: "This is my Son, the Beloved," then he too is driven out into the wilderness to be tempted by Satan. It is his time of trial. It is his time to see if he can actually be the Beloved or if he will fall prey to temptations of comfort and power. But throughout those long days and nights, Jesus is never alone. When the forty days are over the angels are there, waiting for him, and he emerges from the desert ready to begin his ministry.

When life leads us into the wilderness there are a couple of things we need to remember. First, when you are in the wilderness it is easy to stand there and look out to the horizon and see only an endless wasteland of dry and parched ground. When you are in the desert it is easy to think that the desert never ends, that this hard time in your life will never end. But scripture teaches us that every desert has a beginning and an ending. It does not, it will not go on forever. The desert always gives way to something new and something better. That is a truth deeply engrained in the Judeo-Christian experience – the desert always ends. I feel this truth now more than ever during this pandemic.

Second, when you find yourself in the wilderness, the trick is not to look too far ahead, but to keep your heart and your eyes focused on moving forward one step at a time. Just keep going. The temptation is to give up hope or to place your hope in something that can never really save you. That was Satan's trick with Jesus. All three temptations were the Devil's attempts to get Jesus to abandon his faith in God at a time when Jesus could have easily believed that God had abandoned him.

Third, look for God there with you in the desert. God is present in the grace that surrounds you even when life is at its most difficult. Now, what is grace? Grace is the free, unearned, unasked for Love of God that surrounds you in this life and which most of us often fail to see or take for granted. God is with you in the grace of the caring friend, the doctor who goes the extra mile, the coworker who offers you support, the neighbor who brings the casserole, the spouse who stands by you through thick and thin, the community that prays for you and welcomes you as one of their own. Remember, no matter what happens in this life, there is always grace. If you can focus on the grace, like bread crumbs on a poorly marked trail, then you will find your way through the desert.

Life's deserts are never easy, they are never where we want to be, but they come to us all and they can be times of rich growth and insight. They can be the times when we encounter God's love and presence most profoundly in our lives. This Lent, I invite you to look back at the desert journeys in your own life and ask yourself – where was God during this time for me? Where did I experience God's grace? What did I learn in the desert and where did I most often stray away from God? When life is dry and barren what are the temptations to which I am most vulnerable? Then, during these forty days as we travel with Jesus through his own desert experience, remember that you too are God's beloved, and come what may, God will never let you go. Amen.