

SERMON
1st Sunday in Lent
February 21, 2010

Deuteronomy 26:1-11
Psalm 91:1-2, 9-16
Romans 10:8b-13
Luke 4:1-13

Brothers and sisters in Christ, grace to you and peace from God the Father, and from our Lord and Savior Jesus, who is the Christ. Amen.

“I would like to begin this morning with some excerpts from an article entitled; “Settling for Less” written by Barbara Brown Taylor, a well known author, Episcopal Priest and professor of religion at Piedmont College in Demorest, Georgia.

Taylor writes: “Do not bother looking for Lent in your Bible dictionary. There was no such thing in biblical times. There is some evidence that early Christians fasted 40 hours between Good Friday and Easter.

However, the custom of spending 40 days in prayer and self-denial did not arise until later. It was after the initial rush of Christian adrenaline was over and believers had gotten very ho-hum about their faith.

When the world did not end as his followers had believed Jesus himself had said it would, they stopped expecting so much from God or from themselves.

They hung a wooden cross on the wall and settled back into their more or less comfortable routines, remembering their once passionate devotion to God. Perhaps in the same way they remembered the other enthusiasms of their youth.

Little by little, Christians became devoted instead, to their own comforts: The soft couch, the flannel sheets, the leg of lamb roasted with rosemary.

These things made them feel safe and cared for – if not by God, then by themselves. They decided that there was no contradiction between being comfortable and being Christian.

And before long it was very hard to pick Christians out from the population at large. They no longer distinguished themselves by their bold love for one another. They did not get arrested for championing the poor. They blended in. They avoided extremes. They decided to be nice instead of holy, and God moaned out loud.

Hearing that, someone suggested that it was time to call Christians back to their senses. And the Bible offered some clues about how to do that. Israel spent 40 years in the wilderness learning to trust the Lord.

Elijah spent 40 days there before hearing the still, small voice of God. It was on the same mountain where Moses spent 40 days listening to God give the law.

There was also Luke's story that we just heard where Jesus spent 40 days in the wilderness during which he was tempted by the devil. It was hard. It was awful. It was necessary.

Those of us who believe this story now have proof that it is humanly possible to remain loyal to God.

So the early church announced a season of Lent, from the old English word *lenten*, meaning "spring." It was a period of 40 days to cleanse the system and open the eyes to what remains when all comfort is gone. Forty days to remember what it is like to live by the grace of God alone and not by what we can supply for ourselves."

Thus we again begin the season of Lent. A few days ago we gathered together and had ashes placed on our foreheads. We heard the words; "Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return." It was an invitation to enter into the wilderness of our lives.

How many of you have heard of a program called “Outward Bound?” I don’t know if it is as big now, but a few years ago it was very popular. Companies would bring their staff to Outward Bound for the purpose of building character and promoting teamwork.

No one was required to sign up for it. But if you did, you would give up the illusion that you are in control of your life. You place yourself in the hands of strangers who ask you to do foolhardy things. Things such as to walk backwards over a cliff with nothing but a rope around your waist.

Things such as climbing a sheer rock face with your fingers and toes. But none of these are the real test. Because, while you were doing them, you have plenty of people around you in case you get into trouble. And then of course, lunch is in the cooler a few steps away.

The real test comes when you go solo. The strangers put you out all by yourself in the middle of nowhere and wish you luck for the next 24 hours. That is when you find out who you are. That is when you find out what you really miss and what you are really afraid of.

Some people dream about their favorite food. Some long for a safe room with a door to lock. Others just wish they had a pillow. But they all find out what their pacifiers are – what they use to comfort themselves. Without those things, they are suddenly, totally exposed.

It’s not an easy thing to do. It challenges you in ways like you could never imagine. It’s scary. You begin to fear things that you have never feared before. But it does have a positive side. It helps you to find out what life is like with no other things to give you comfort except for God. This is what it is like in the wilderness.

In our Gospel story today, Jesus, after being filled with the Holy Spirit at his baptism, is led into the wilderness. There he is tempted by the devil with such things as food, power, and safety. Of course, Jesus did not succumb to the temptations.

Now, you have probably already heard about a million sermons on what Jesus and the devil said to each other that day. You have heard about how Jesus was tempted and so are we. Jesus was strong, and so must we be strong. All good points. But let's face it, it doesn't take much more than an all-you-can-eat buffet after missing breakfast to turn our heads.

Therefore, what I want to focus on instead, is where the test took place – the wilderness – because I have a feeling that just about every one of us here today has already been there at some point in our lives.

Let me give you some examples of the wilderness experiences that I heard about just this past week – many of them having do with your brothers and sisters here at Atascocita Lutheran Church.

This past week I heard the story of how Dee Caplett's parent's house burned down in northern Michigan. Thankfully, they were able to escape unharmed, at least physically. However, everything was lost, including their dog. The memories of a lifetime consumed in fire. They were literally standing in the wilderness outside their place they once called home, with only the clothes on their backs.

I listened to Steve Moore as he told me that after losing his father only a few weeks ago, he recently found out that his uncle has an aggressive form of stomach cancer.

I received a call from a young woman in our congregation who has a close friend who lives in Huffman. This friend is the mom of a 5 year old girl who has brain cancer. The girl is not expected to live more than a few weeks.

The family does not have a church home. I was asked if I could preside over the memorial service, and if the family can use our facility since they have nowhere else to turn to.

I spent time in the hospital this week with Patti Alley and her family as the doctors prepared to remove her right leg above the knee due to problems with blood circulation. She was unable to make that decision herself, so her children were left with the painful task of deciding for her. Without the surgery, she was not expected to live.

On Monday night, I went out for a couple of beers with a good friend of mine who just lost his job the week before. He is now struggling with where to go next and how this will affect his family.

On Friday night, I talked with a friend that I have known for almost 30 years. We had begun working together in the jewelry business in Minneapolis. He told me that he had just attended his first AA meeting.

He has suffered with depression for years which has recently been complicated with heavy drinking and charging up thousands of dollars on credit cards. He now fears that he might lose his job, and that after many threats, his wife will now leave him.

And finally, my wife, Linnae was in Kentucky this past week visiting with her mother who is in hospice care. One evening I called her and asked what she was doing. And with a broken voice she said, "watching my mom die."

These were just a few of the wilderness stories I heard this past week. I'm sure there are many others that I did not hear of.

Wildernesses come in so many shapes and sizes, that the only way you can really tell that you are in one, is to look around for what you normally count on to save your life, and come up empty.

Needless to say, this is not a situation that many of us seek. Most of us, in fact, spend a lot of time and money trying to stay out of the wilderness; but I don't know anyone who succeeds at that entirely or forever.

Sooner or later, every one of us will get to take our own wilderness exam, our own trip to a desert to discover who we really are and what our lives are really about.

I guess that could sound like bad news. But I don't think it is. I think it is truly good news. Because even if no one ever wants to go there – even if those of us who end up there want out again as soon as possible – the wilderness is still one of the most reality-based, spirit-filled, life-changing places a person can be.

So what can the wilderness teach us? Dependence. For in the wilderness, we are forced to depend on something or someone greater and bigger than ourselves. We call this someone “God”. Our story tells us that God's Spirit was with Jesus all during his wilderness experience.

And that same Spirit is with each and every one of us. We receive this Spirit through the waters of baptism. God's spirit invades our lives with grace and mercy, with compassion and forgiveness, with unconditional love.

And this is the love that we are called to share as we journey through this Lenten season and beyond. It is a love that is uniquely present during our wilderness times. And it is a love that can and must be shared.

It has been said that in order to enlarge our capacity to love, we must enlarge our capacity to suffer. And what better example of that do we have than the cross. For it is in that wilderness that we can know true love.

I would like to close with the words of the author John Stendahl. Stendahl speaks beautifully of the wilderness – not only the wilderness in which Jesus was tested, but every wilderness in which we experience, at one time or another.

So please, if you are experiencing a wilderness in your life, if you feel that there is only desert all around you, listen to these words.

Stendahl writes: “For the desert is not God-forsaken nor does it belong to the devil. It is God’s home. The Holy Spirit is there, within us and beside us.

And if we cannot feel that spirit inside of us or at our side, perhaps we can at least imagine Jesus there, not too far away, with enough in him to sustain us, enough to make us brave.”

And so, let us set out on the journey of Lent, toward the cross, and remembering the empty tomb beyond. Amen.

May the peace that passes all understanding be with you now and for life everlasting. Amen.