

KEEPING FAITH IN THE WILDERNESS

St Andrew's UC Sudbury; February 21, 2010

Luke 4:1-13

Today is the first Sunday of Lent.

I don't know about you,
but I grew up without Lent...

I learned in Sunday School about the significance of the number forty
(Moses on the mountain for 40 days,
Noah's ark rained on for 40 days,
the Hebrew people wandering for 40 *years*,
Jesus in the wilderness for 40 days)
but I never learned to observe the 40 days of Lent.

That has changed, not only for me personally,
but for many mainline churches.

In recent years, Lent
and other observances—like Ash Wednesday, for example,
have been making a comeback.

Not because we're trying to imitate someone else's tradition
and not because we want to impose some kind of rigid rules
or meaningless ritual onto our worship,
but because there really is a significance to the ancient traditions
and people are discovering that there are
life-giving and faith-building reasons to consider reclaiming them.

At its simplest, Lent commemorates the forty days
of Jesus' fasting and temptation in the wilderness—
that gospel lesson we read just a few moments ago from Luke.

Fasting is not really that popular in our time,
at least not in North America.

We have trouble missing our coffee breaks,
never mind whole meals!

But maybe this story of Jesus in the desert
isn't only about missing meals.

Maybe this story has things to show us beyond making us feel
as though we should be giving something up for Lent.

It's one of those stories that is full of mind-bending elements—

Jesus talking with the devil,
and seeing an instant vision of all the kingdoms of the world
and teetering on the highest pinnacle of the temple....
It sounds like the stuff of hallucinations, don't you think?!

Jesus has been fasting for forty days, after all, according to the story.
That's a long time without food.
Luke tells us Jesus was famished at the end of those forty days.
I guess he was!

Famished.

Trembling with hunger and weakness.
All alone in the wilderness.
And then along comes the devil to harass him.

Have you ever felt like that?

That, just when you're at your most vulnerable,
when you're weak and tired and feeling alone,
that's when you're most susceptible to temptation?

The word *wilderness* in the Bible means *uninhabited place*.

The wilderness is where we are alone. Or feel alone.

Where we need to be prepared if we are going to survive
and unforgiving environment.

It's where we can't escape our demons,
because there is nothing to distract us
from really looking inside ourselves.

Wilderness can happen in a lot of ways.

We can find ourselves there when we are struggling for physical strength.
A good friend of mine walked part of the Camino Santiago de Compostela
some years back.

She trained for months with a loaded backpack,
trekking the back roads around Cochrane,
hot pink ribbons fluttering from her person for visibility
.....and a whistle to scare the bears.

Despite the training, she described the weeks of pilgrimage on the Camino
as a wilderness journey—

she was often tempted to despair, to give up,
to succumb to fatigue and aching muscles.

Recently, my friend's experience of wilderness
has become something altogether different.

Last fall she was diagnosed with a rare degenerative condition

that will increasingly compromise her ability to walk, stand, eat, and speak.

Sometimes wilderness happens when we experience loss.

Our grief saps our energy, overwhelming us in huge swamping waves, sometimes at the most unexpected and inopportune times.

Even when our sorrow is shared, we may still feel alone, isolated from others around us, even loved ones.

We ache inside, we feel lost.

And some devilish whisper in our ear says

that maybe God isn't such a kind God after all,

and maybe what the minister says

about the hereafter isn't even true, how can we know?

Or maybe wilderness happens for a single parent

exhausted by responsibilities

tired of 24/7 child care

worried about paying bills and buying groceries

and monitoring how much screen time their child is getting.

And, in all that stress,

maybe that parent starts to believe that they are all alone,

that nobody else really cares or understands.

They feel like giving up.

They don't trust themselves to be a good parent.

However and wherever it comes,

wilderness is a hard and barren place to be.

It was a hard place for Jesus to be.

His wilderness happened right after his baptism, in fact.

Not quite what we would expect after a baptism, is it?

Usually we think of celebration, not temptation and hardship.

Usually baptism means relatives and faith family crowding around,

not solitude in the wilderness.

Usually baptism means feasting, not fasting.

But Jesus, right after his baptism, heads into the wilderness.

No friends. No food. No celebration.

Why? What's on his mind? What's bothering him?

I believe the clues are in what happens to Jesus

in that wilderness experience—

what it is that Jesus' devil pesters him about.
Something is so heavy on Jesus' mind
that he quits eating and keeps to himself
until he can sort this out.
Day after day, he turns it over and over in his mind,
wondering if he heard right,
second-guessing himself,
questioning whether he's just imagining things.
Did God *really* call him—Jesus—to this ministry?!
Can it be possible that he—Jesus—is the messiah, the chosen one?

The temptation is to try to prove it out somehow.
Just to be sure.
Do some wizardry—
turn those stones into bread, God knows he could stand to eat something!
Or maybe he shouldn't try to do this all on his own.
Maybe he should work with someone else,
someone who has a little more expertise,
someone who is more of an authority on the subject.
It's tempting.
Or what about asking God to prove it.
Like, maybe confirm the call to ministry somehow.
Surely it wouldn't hurt to get another opinion.

If you are the Son of God, if you are the Son of God....
the words keep bouncing around in Jesus' head,
and he knows he can't do anything
until he can find his way through this wilderness.

Jesus does find his way out of the wilderness, of course.
That is part of the richness of this story.
The thing that gets him through the temptations
and the hunger and the exhaustion and the angst
is the deep truth that is the deep truth for all of us:
that we are never, ever alone.

In every one of those moments of weakness
Jesus relies on another kind of strength.
Not his own strength, he doesn't have any of that left.
What he leans on now is his radical trust in God.

Yes, he's in the place where demons dwell
and they're skulking around in his head.
Yes, he's hungry and worn out and can hardly think straight anymore.
Yes, his anxiety levels have peaked—
he *knows* what the sacred writings say
about the path of God's chosen One
and it's not a job anyone would volunteer for.
Yes to all of that.

But yes also to Jesus' deeper sense of God's presence with him.
Jesus knows he is not alone with his demons.
He knows this because he has already experienced God's presence before.
He has a history with God.
He has a connection with the sacred.
He has practiced and he has learned.
He has built a foundation for faith,
so that now, when he desperately needs it, he has something to fall back on.

Marcus Borg, author and theologian,
says it's faith that is at the heart of Christianity.
The New Testament is full of references to faith.
And full of stories about faith...
like this one about Jesus in the wilderness.
Borg describes four different ways of understanding faith.
One is faith as belief—
that is, saying yes to certain truths, such as the reality of God.
Faith is also about fidelity, continues Borg—
faithfulness, not to creeds or doctrines, but to the God
to *whom* the scriptures and creeds and doctrines point.
Faith as fidelity results in a God-centred life.

The third way Borg describes faith is as a way of seeing life—
to view life as full of God's grace and generosity and provision.
This kind of faith empowers us to live life with hope and joy and vision.
And the fourth way to talk about faith is as radical trust—
radical trust in God as the one on whom we can rely,
our foundation and safe place,
our rock and support.
Faith like this frees us from worry and anxiety and fear.

New Testament scholar Tom Long puts it this way:

God can be trusted.

Think again about Jesus in the wilderness,
tempted to give in, tempted to doubt God's call on his life,
tempted to worry about whether he can do the job,
tempted to focus on his hunger and fatigue and solitude.
In those moments of vulnerability, Jesus resorts to faith.
That's all he has for the moment.

But it's enough, isn't it?
It's enough for Jesus to remember that he believes in the reality of God.
God is there with him.
It's enough for him to bank on the fact that God will provide.
He doesn't have to worry about where his food will come from
or who his friends will be.
It's enough for Jesus to hang onto his sense of commitment,
his loyalty to the God he has come to trust.
God called him and God will provide the way
for Jesus to keep saying yes to that call.
Faith is enough for Jesus because, in his mind's eye,
he can still see the vision that God has put before him,
challenges and all.

Never mind, Jesus says to that wicked whispering in his soul,
never mind.
I don't live only for bread—there are bigger things at stake here.
I will worship the God I have come to know and trust.
I won't keep questioning God's word to me—
I am going to stop fretting and being anxious,
and simply believe in God's goodness.

Simply believe.
It sounds easier than it is for most of us, I suspect.
Faith does not always come easily.
I have wondered what it costs my good friend to say,
as she looks down the road to the time
when she will no longer be able to feed herself
or talk about the ideas in her head—
what it costs her to say, "I will not be afraid,

because I am not going anywhere Jesus has not already been.”

It's what we yearn for, isn't it?

The kind of faith that reassures us that we are never alone.

That God will always provide.

That worrying is a waste of time and energy.

That all will be well, and all manner of things will be well

(Julian of Norwich).

Perhaps faith best comes into its own in the wilderness.

I close with words by Terry Anderson

from his book, “Den of Lions,” the account of his wilderness experience:

Where is faith found?

not in a book or in a church,

not often or for everyone.

In childish times, it's easier;

a child believes just what it's told.

But children grow and soon begin

to see too much that doesn't match the simple tales,

and not enough of what's behind their parents' words.

There is no God, the cynics say;

we made him up out of our need and fear of death.

And happily they offer up their test-tube proofs.

A mystery, the priests all say,

and point to saints who prove their faith

in acts of love and sacrifice.

But what of us, who are not saints,

only common human sinners?

And what of those who in their need and pain cry out to God

and go on suffering?

I do not know—

I wish I did.

Sometimes I feel all the world's pain.

I only say that once in my own need

I felt a light and warm and loving touch

that eased my soul and banished doubt

and let me go on to the end.

It is not proof—there can be none.

Faith's what you find when you're alone

...and find you're not. Amen.