

First Sunday in Lent
Romans 10:8b-13, Psalm 91, Luke 4:1-13
February 14, 2016
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Fresh from the waters of baptism, Jesus, full the Holy Spirit, is led by the same Spirit into the wilderness for 40 days of temptation. The wilderness is the place of challenge. Few choose to go there willingly, John the Baptist being the Biblical exception. The people of Israel spent 40 years there mostly against their will as they frequently grumbled against their leader Moses.

Juanita and I did a course called “Ways in the Wilderness,” as you know, last October in Israel and Jordan. While we visited actual dry, hot and desolate places, we always had three square meals, modern bathroom facilities and a soft bed to sleep in. Mostly, we learned about how earlier desert monastics lived. Visiting the wilderness is far different from suffering the hardships of the wilderness.

Wilderness doesn’t have to be a place. It can be a metaphor for any time in our lives when we are suddenly cast into a state of discomfort, chaos or uncertainty.

Divorce, death, illness, job loss, relocation and natural disaster are a few of the causes of wilderness we usually don’t willingly choose. These are all times of testing or temptation as we are forced to make new and unfamiliar decisions about how to respond and survive.

A speaker at last weekend’s Diocesan Annual Council said that there are three zones we tend to live in. The first is our “comfort zone.” We choose this most often because we feel safe and secure there. The problem is that we can’t grow if we stay there all the time. We remain stagnant, and it can turn out to be a dead zone.

The second, he called a “challenge zone.” Here we take a risk and try something new. In this zone circumstances are not entirely predictable, and we feel off balance or unsure of ourselves. It is the growth zone. By placing ourselves in the challenge zone, we grow and expand our comfort zone.

The third zone, which we want to try and avoid, is the “panic zone.” This is when we feel the urge to fight or flee. If and when we find ourselves there, we need to withdraw to our comfort zone as soon as possible and regain our equilibrium.

My reason for bringing this up is that it seems to me the wilderness, whether chosen during Lent or thrust upon us at any time, is a “challenge zone” from which great growth can emerge.

The church season of Lent is, of course, 40 days long because that is how long Jesus spent in the wilderness. I don’t look forward to this season, but like flossing and certain forms of exercise, I

know it is ultimately good for me. During Lent, I usually feel the need to give something up for that length of time. I try to pick something that I enjoy every day but not anything essential to my health and well-being – a little hardship. Perhaps the best reason to do this is to identify just a tad with Jesus' ultimate sacrifice of his life. It also makes Easter so much better because I can resume my little pleasure.

But apart from a little 40-day discipline, I believe the deeper and far more important and challenging goal of the Lenten season is to ask myself how I can more nearly surrender my life to Christ so that I can become a living sacrifice to God. In an article I've saved called "An Empty Space," Claudia Dickson writes, "These 40 days of Lent are for our spiritual transformation, not for developing better habits." She writes that giving up something for a while might prove that we have will power, but is that something that God needs for us to acquire?

Jesus didn't retreat to a deserted place and fast to prove that he could survive the elements and go without food, but rather to eliminate anything that would distract him from hearing God's voice. He needed to discover what kind of messiah God wanted him to be.

Dickson further writes, "God does not need self-directed, self-motivated people. Instead, these 40 days are set aside so that we can begin to surrender control of our lives." She continues, "Therefore, it seems to me our goal should not be to develop our will power, but instead begin to set it aside."

What can we do this Lent? How can we rearrange our daily schedules to carve out some "empty space" to better listen and learn God's direction for our lives? I try to choose my little discipline so that it frees up more time for daily silence and contemplation. I have to admit to you, however, that my practice of quieting my mind and listening hasn't been very productive lately. Perhaps spending a little longer at it each morning will help.

Along with, and in addition to this, another spiritual discipline that I need to practice is that of being more present to each moment. If our God is both out there and within the very fabric of life and nature, then the Holy can be encountered regularly in all places and in all circumstances, even in the mundane and routine aspects of our lives.

It's about paying attention and expecting to see, hear, feel a sense wonder all around us. The problem is that to do this we need to get outside ourselves. I spend way too much time involved in my own issues as if the world revolves around only those things that concern me – my work, my home, my finances, my family, my health, etc. I am enslaved to my own concerns, right where the devil wants me.

To better the practice of realizing and experiencing the divine presence in and around us all the time, we will also have to practice the earlier discipline I spoke of – letting go of our wills and attachments to our stuff alone.

I wish like Jesus it would take me only 40 days to brush off the devil's wiles and yield more completely to the Father's will. I'm afraid I'll still need a few hundred more Lents to get there.

As for the temptations themselves, they are rather particular to Jesus who is listening to hear what exactly his unique calling as God's beloved Son should be. Feeding a hungry world, ruling with divine imperatives and drawing attention to himself and his message by performing spectacular deeds are not all bad but not as important as revealing God's favor by laying down his life for the world. The devil would be successful if he could persuade Jesus to succumb to any of these more limited vocations.

As for us, the temptation that might impact our lives the most is the subtle one repeated twice by the devil this morning, "If you are the Son of God..." Jesus' strength to resist the devil and ours to live each day for Christ is founded on the premise that Jesus is the only begotten Son and we are adopted sons and daughters of our Father in heaven. There are no ifs, ands or buts about it. We are beloved. We are the apple of God's eye and heirs of the kingdom. Even when we don't act like it, we are still loved by God beyond our imagining. And don't let your mind, the devil or anyone else tell you differently! We need the church to remind us of this great truth over and over as our memories are short.

We are marked as Christ's own forever in baptism. With God's constant help, let us all have a holy and productive Lent this year. AMEN.