

# DWELLING IN THE DESERT

Luke 4:1-13

Sunday, February 21, 2010 – Lent 1

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Many years ago, a friend and I decided to drive across the Mojave Desert, from Los Angeles to Phoenix, to visit a friend. I was very excited by the prospect. I wanted to see the Joshua trees and the Saguaro Cacti and the big, open sky.

Somewhere in Arizona, we both noticed that we had not seen another car for a very long time. Cresting a hill with an incredible view, I asked my friend to stop the truck. We both got out and neither of us spoke. We could see for miles and miles. And in all directions, there was not a sign of human life: no cars, no billboards, no telephone wires, nothing. It was perfectly still. And the silence seemed heavy, almost as if it made it harder to breathe. As I tried to take it all in, I was suddenly afraid. You see, there was nothing to distract me from the emptiness. I was acutely aware that we were miles from help. I suspected that we were surrounded by desert creatures hiding in the scrub and the silence and the sand. We lingered just long enough to take a picture of me standing in the middle of the road. And then we got in the truck and we drove until we reached the comfort of concrete and buildings and people. We had no desire to dwell in the desert.

Several years later, I spent a month in Israel studying. One day we traveled out to the Wilderness; the very place that tradition says Jesus spent his 40 days of testing. We stepped off the air-conditioned bus and into 117 degrees of blistering heat and wind. The sand was blowing so strongly that you had to cover your mouth and keep your eyes squinted just to be able to stand there for a few moments. I snapped a couple of picture with my eyes closed and retreated to the safety of the bus. Once again, I had no desire to dwell in the desert.

We all have desert stories. You may never have been to a real desert, but that doesn't matter because deserts are more than sun and sand. Some of us know the desert of a loveless marriage or the death of a loved one or a sense that you have not found your place in the world or a faith that is made up of far more questions than it is answers. We humans know the desert. And for the most part, we have little desire to stay there. It's too frightening; too open; too stark.

The Bible is full of desert stories. Some might imagine that this is only natural, assuming that the Holy Land is nothing but a big desert. But that is not the case. Jerusalem blooms in the springtime. Galilee is full of verdant

fields and clear lakes. You have to travel to get to the desert, even in the Holy Land.

And that's exactly what holy people did. They sought out the solitude and quiet. They were looking for God and it made sense to them to retreat to a place without distractions. Moses the Law-giver and Elijah the prophet spent time in the desert. John the Baptist lived all alone in the wilderness. St. Paul, after his conversion, went off by himself to the Arabian Desert. In the 3<sup>rd</sup> century, the desert fathers retreated to the Scetes desert of Egypt. And our Lord Jesus Christ went to the wilderness, to fast and pray for 40 long days.

The season of Lent always begins with this desert story. The Temptation of Jesus in the wilderness was the beginning of his passion, a passion that would culminate on a cross. And so every year, we take this Lenten journey with Jesus. We go with him into the wilderness of our lives, where we dwell in the silence. But we often go reluctantly. Deserts frighten us.

Luke says that Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness where he was tempted. Isn't that an odd thought? Every week we pray, "Lead us not into temptation" and yet that is the very thing the Spirit does to Jesus. Some

scholars have rightly noted that the word is better translated as testing, not temptation. But however you slice it, God's hand is visible in leading Jesus to the desert places of testing.

While in the wilderness, Jesus fasted for 40 days. And that's hard enough. But Luke says that during those 40 days, Jesus was tempted by the devil. Luke even provides us with details of the conversation. When I read this, I don't imagine our Lord actually talking to a little red man with horns and a pitchfork. Instead, I suspect that this conversation, like the ones we have with temptation, was internal. This conversation was all about Jesus struggling to understand, as Frederick Buechner puts it, "what it meant to be Jesus."

Now lots of sermons have been preached about the three temptations that Jesus had to face: the satisfaction of his bodily needs, his need for recognition and his need for protection. But today I am more interested in the fact that instead of fleeing the desert when things got too ugly, Jesus planted his feet and stayed where he was. He stuck it out. The result of that fortitude; that resolve, was that he emerged with a much clearer vision of who he was and what God wanted of him. He discovered, only by being willing to stay, that the desert did not destroy him. It made him strong.

So what did Jesus know that we don't seem to? What did prophets and sages and saints acknowledge that we don't want to? Why did they dwell in the desert when it would have been much easier to just stay home and watch TV or go shopping or have another drink? What did they discover in the silence and the solitude that set them on a new path?

In the early 1990s, when I was struggling with my call to ministry in a denomination that did not want me, I decided to make a pilgrimage to the Abbey of the Genesee in western New York. It's a Trappist monastery, which means, among other things, that no one speaks. I arrived and was shone my room. All it contained was a single bed, a desk, a lamp, a chair, and a crucifix. I knew from the start that this simplicity and silence would be a challenge for me. But my need for spiritual clarity was more important than my need for familiarity and comfort.

Everything was going alright until about the third night. All week long I had been suffering with seasonal allergies. And on that third night, I woke with a terrible pain in my sinuses. I couldn't sleep so I got out of bed and begin to pace the floor. Somehow that pain seemed to open me up to be more honest in

talking to God. Eventually, I sat in the chair and began to write. And I wrote and wrote and wrote. I poured out all of those things I had been feeling: every hurt, every confusion, every longing for a sense of God's direction in my life. And I didn't try to fix any of it. Instead, although I had spent years running away from these questions, I stayed with them until I finally fell to sleep. The next morning I woke up feeling so much better, in body and in spirit. I didn't have all the answers, but I was closer than I had been. And I had a renewed sense that God was directing the steps of my life. And all these many years later, I stand in this pulpit, at least in part, because of a willingness to travel to a desert and to stay there until understanding came to me.

And that, dear friends, is the universal promise of Lent. If we will walk with Jesus these 40 days; if we will be brave enough to stay in the darkness and name our fears and give words to our hopes; then the same God who finally led Jesus to Resurrection and new life will do the very same for us.

Thanks be to God. Amen.