

Sermon – Lent 1 – St Luke and St Matthew, Brooklyn

Luke 4:1-13

In our Christian life, we talk a lot about journeying and that's because our life of faith is a journey deeper and deeper into relationship with God, through Jesus and the Holy Spirit. The iterative process of faith is largely driven by the depth of our curiosity toward God and how willing we are to explore our faith. I know I have mentioned to you over the past few sermons the need for stillness in our lives so that we are able to hear the still small voice of the Spirit beckoning us to come closer. The busyness of our lives can act as a barrier to hearing God's voice. It has always been so.

Over the millennia, since Abraham and Sarah walked south from their comfortable lives in Ur in Babylon on the shores of the Persian Gulf, pilgrims of faith have been leaving their busy lives and heading out into the desert wilderness to find stillness and to commune with God. You might remember the story of Elijah's tangle with King Ahab and his wife Jezebel that caused him to flee to the desert to escape the wrath of Jezebel. It was there that he encountered an angel of the Lord who provided food for him and God spoke with him out of the stillness he found there.

The apostle Paul fled to the desert to find the space to process what had happened to him on the road to Damascus where he encountered Jesus. He needed time away with his thoughts to fully comprehend God's call of him to a changed life.

In the second and third centuries after Jesus' ascension followers of Christ fled to the desert to escape the persecution of the Romans and to explore their faith. The third century ascetics were men and women who went out to the desert to find God. For them it was a place of new life not death. It was a place to find oneself in the stillness where there was nothing but your own thoughts, the sound of the wind, the heat of the sun and the spirit of God. It was a place where people experienced a closeness with God. It was a place where they learnt a lot about themselves as they endured both physical hardship and spiritual evolution.

The early monastics had a saying for eager young monks. "Go to your cell and your cell will teach you everything." The desert for the ascetics was like the cell for the monastics. It was a place to be still and a place to learn by discerning God's voice.

On this first Sunday in Lent it is fitting that we spend some time reflecting on the journey of our spiritual life. Just like our physical life we are born into faith as an infant no matter what age we accept Jesus as Lord and savior. We need nurturing, teaching and patience. Saying yes to moving God to the center of our lives is just the start of a long and incredibly varied life of faith.

Jesus in his human form was no different to us but he was more spiritually mature. Despite this he still had to endure the same temptations we experience.

After Jesus was baptized he was led out to the desert by the Holy Spirit. It was there in the barren, rocky landscape, characterized according to Kenneth Leech by “waste, darkness and struggle,” that Jesus was to explore his faith and do battle with the spiritual forces that can ensnare the soul and distort even the most noble intentions. Just like us, Jesus had to face up to this time of testing.

The forces of darkness and disruption that we have called the devil, Satan or the evil one accompanied Jesus for the forty days and nights he was out in the desert wilderness. Jesus must have weakened as he hungered for food and his body labored and cramped, and his mouth dried from a lack of water.

In his weakened state the dark forces began their work. First, they tried to lure Jesus into using his power as the Son of God to accept relief by turning a stone into a loaf of bread. Jesus responded in truth, drawing on the words of the Torah scriptures to negate the temptation. “It is written: ‘one does not live on bread alone.’” This first temptation was put before Jesus to satisfy his physical hunger but his spirit was strong.

Next the evil one led him to a place where Jesus could survey the world of kingdoms and he was promised it all if he would only acknowledge the supremacy of the devil. Again, Jesus countered the temptation of ambition with scripture. “Worship the Lord your God and serve only him.”

Finally, the devil became wise to Jesus use of scripture to defend himself against the temptations and instead cunningly used scripture as a weapon to tempt Jesus to test the power of God to save him. Jesus had no doubt about God nor unbelief and so didn’t need to test God. He had the ultimate faith and trust in God his Father.

The devil struck out three times and went to the dugout. Just like in baseball it was for a short time. The next inning was close and he would come out again to face Jesus.

As Christians, we are also faced with the temptations of the evil one, for the devil will not let a Christian rest for long. We will be tempted to turn away from sober living and moderation. We will be tempted to put ambition and success ahead of God. We will also be tempted to boast about our lives and our faith, to be filled with pride rather than living quietly learning about one’s faith and growing strong.

As our spiritual journey continues to unfold we will grow stronger and more capable of identifying the ways the dark forces of life will try to destabilize us and our families, our church and our spiritual lives. We will also recognize the ways we are able to respond to these temptations using the same scripture lessons that Jesus used all those years before. Scripture after all contains all things necessary for salvation.

The final stage in our spiritual maturity is an outward acknowledgement that God is the one true God who yearns to be center in our lives. Paul reminds us this morning in the passage we

heard from his letter to the Romans (10:8b-13) “that if we confess with our lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in our hearts that God raised him from the dead, we will be saved. No one who believes in him will be put to shame,” he says.

There is strength in the proclamation and confession that our faith in God is strong and well founded. When we reach this point in life it becomes natural to want to share our faith and to be examples for our families and communities. It is also natural for us to want to share our resources with others, knowing that they come to us as gifts from God.

The Israelites endured a lifetime in the desert wilderness tempted by the very same dark forces as Jesus endured. It was there that they matured spiritually which enabled them to reach their destiny and to function as a community as God intended. When they finally settled in the promised land and started to reap the benefits of their inheritance, God asked them to give back some of what they produced. It was to be an acknowledgment of the blessings they received from God who provided all things for them. We are asked to do the same by tithing our income and gifts

For us living here in Brooklyn we might feel far away from the desert life and any wilderness, although we might find the dense urban landscape a wilderness at times. It is not that God can't be found in the busyness of urban ministry and life, for surely God is there, but we need the peace of the desert, to really hear the spirit of God in our soul.

A way to find that space today is by attending a spiritual retreat. Taking retreats is such an important part of our spiritual life. They help us break the cycle of busyness and replace it with an environment of stillness and silence where we can hear the still small voice of God tugging at our hearts. We need the stillness and the silence created by retreats to tend our souls.

Jesus understands the journey of the spiritual life as iterative and that it takes time for us to grow deeper in our relationship with Him and each other. He understands that in baptism we are filled with the Holy Spirit that protects us and guides us to resist the temptations put in our way by the evil one. He understands that when we mature enough to proclaim our faith we will also have generous hearts that thank God for the inheritance we have in Jesus his Son.

If you feel inundated with temptations in your life take heart that you are not alone and you are not failing in your spiritual life. It happens to all of us. We can resist temptation by deepening our knowledge of God through studying scripture, praying, engaging in fellowship and in the breaking of bread which we will do soon.

We will gain strength to persevere and if we fail, we can always repent and turn back to the Lord. That is a promise. We proclaim our faith by serving others, loving our neighbor and striving for peace, justice, and respecting the dignity of every brother and sister we meet.

This is our baptismal covenant and this is our life.
Amen