

Sermon – First Sunday in Lent

Mark 1: 9-14

Ash Wednesday was for me, and I hope for you to, a solemn, quiet day. Even though we couldn't gather this year, the reason we do gather remains relevant. We acknowledge being lost, we lament our actions, and we pledge to begin anew the journey deeper into God's love.

It has been, and continues to be hard to ignore the pandemic and how it has shaped our lives over the past twelve months. We have lived through a year of anxiety, fear, apprehension and uncertainty, riding the waves of emotion from despair to hope. We are not released from its hold on us just yet.

So this Lent is a good time for us to take stock of where we are in our relationship with God. The season of Lent offers us a dedicated and deliberate time to reflect on our lives, our journey of faith and our regrets, both individually and as a community.

Before the pandemic upended our lives, similar tragic events seemed to be what shocked us most, events that took the lives of many people at one time and often resulted in some people questioning the existence of God. Three years ago on Ash Wednesday in 2018, 17 mostly young school students were killed in Parkland Florida and another 16 or so physically injured. Many more were psychologically injured. I was one of a number of tragic mass shootings in schools that thankfully have been absent this past year.

One of the defining images of the day that stayed with me was shown in a photograph of two women embracing each other in tears of anguish. One of the women had an ash cross marked on her forehead. She had done what most of us did that Wednesday. She headed to a church, prayed and had herself marked as we do, as fragile, organic people. It is ritual that we complete each year, along with the ritual grieving for the dead of mass shootings and now the dead from the pandemic.

The memory of that day has largely receded from our consciousness, overtaken by new tragedies that overwhelm us. However, a troubling reawakening of the Parkland tragedy has emerged from those that believe it was all a conspiracy, a staged event by publicity seeking people.

Conspiracies have long existed in human psychology but over the past few years they seem to have exploded. Recently of course people have come up with all sorts of reasons the pandemic started and of course, the conspiracy around Trump's election loss manifested itself in an insurrection on January 6, with the loss of five lives.

The question I ask myself about conspirators is what might be missing from the lives. Why peddle conspiracies and reject truth and facts? What might they be searching for? Recognition, belonging or acceptance maybe. Their behavior often leads to isolation from family and friends, which reinforces the loss of a sense of belonging.

Of course believing conspiracies does not have to mean believing in outlandish stories. Conspiracies arise when we lose trust in others and in community. We've had to absorb so

much new information about COVID-19 over the past year, and the election, that some may find it all too much to understand. Sometimes information fatigue leads us to follow false prophets that take us down rabbit holes, away from verifiable truth.

If we find that we have veered on to a path that is away from truth, for instance believing conspiracy theories about the COVID-19 vaccines, then this is the season for us to reflect on that, to see if we are living in a wilderness, absent of truth. Jesus knew of the isolation of the wilderness, because it was where he was taken and where he was confronted by temptation and evil spirits.

A few years ago I went to Israel on a pilgrimage. One day our journey took us out from the town of Jericho to a vantage point that overlooked a dry plain and a mountain in the distance. This we were told was the wilderness where Jesus was driven by the Spirit and spent 40 days being tended by angels.

The mountain was dry and rocky and caves dotted the hillside. The only sign of life was an orthodox monastery literally built on the side of the mountain. It was wholly inhospitable, devoid of water, a wilderness of rocks, dust and wind. I couldn't imagine anyone surviving a few days out there let alone 40. The companionship of angels would indeed be required to make the stay bearable.

Mark tells us that it was the Spirit that drove Jesus to the wilderness. Once unified with God through baptism it was Jesus' destiny to be immediately challenged by the forces of darkness in the wilderness. This is how the dark spirits work to disrupt our relationship with God.

The temptation of Jesus by Satan would have surely tested his resolve to live. As he weakened both physically and mentally, the temptation to seek relief would have grown exponentially. No one, not even Jesus I would contend, wants to stay in the wilderness experience, especially the wilderness of emotional despair, conspiracies and so-called alternative facts. Eventually the wilderness life becomes exhausting and unsustainable.

In Chapter 4 verse 15 of the Book of Hebrews the writer says of Jesus— “for we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weakness, but we have one who in every respect has been tested, as we are, yet without sin.” Jesus has walked in our shoes.

In those 40 days, on that rocky mountain, Jesus experienced what it was like to be emotionally and physically tested and the struggle to resist the temptation, to flee the emotional stress and physical pain. Obedience to the Spirit, the companionship of the angels and faith in God his Father was his strength and his balm.

The wilderness of grief, the wilderness of despair or the wilderness of conspiracy can be a place of physical and emotional trial. None of us are immune from it no matter how much we try and avoid it. It is an uncomfortable place to be but can often be a place of personal growth, and a place of contemplation and reflection, for the desert is a spiritual place.

There are many life experiences that can take us into an emotional wilderness. Managing a serious illness, suffering grief from the death of a child or a parent or a spouse, being rejected by family or friends, or experiencing a traumatic event like Parkland Fl or Sandy

Hook CT, or Las Vegas NV. These are all experiences that can drive us into the wilderness of despair and numbness.

Dr Alan Wolfelt has written extensively on grief and what he calls “the wilderness of the soul” experience. He acknowledges, and many of us would agree I think, that the liminal space that is the wilderness of the soul “is a spiritual space where most people hate to be, but where the experience of grief, despair or conspiracy leads them.” We call the wilderness experience a liminal space because it is a place in between, a threshold if you like between one’s previous life experience, and what lies ahead, between the past and a new life in Jesus Christ.

Dr Wolfelt says that it is in this liminal space “where the grievers worldview – the set of beliefs about how the world functions and what place they as individuals occupy, comes into question.” He goes on to say that piecing back together one’s shattered worldview “requires companions that do not think their helping role is to fix or give answers or explanations.” There is no one-way to pass through this testing time of suffering.

Jesus was not out in the wilderness alone; angels accompanied him. It was his experience to live and they didn’t try to shorten his time there. We don’t need to be alone either.

Usually, most people dislike pain, sadness, anxiety or loss of control. Often our desire is to move others or ourselves out of any painful or sad experience as quickly as possible. It is hard to stand by a loved one or friend and watch them suffer.

To that end we can often find ourselves encouraging the lost, the mourner or the sick to cheer up, to move on, to be less emotional, or to acknowledge it’s really not that bad. Probably the worse thing to say to anyone suffering is for them to think of others who might be suffering more. Often we say unhelpful things because as a companion or friend we are uncomfortable because we may not know how to relate. We might never have had a wilderness of the soul experience ourselves.

The challenge for us is to accompany those that are lost or grieve or are sick on their journey through the liminal space and time of their wilderness experience, and to stay with them wherever their emotions take them. This may also trigger in us pain and suffering due to our unresolved grief and sadness. We cannot be true companions until we are also able to embrace the fear and unknowing of the wilderness experience.

When we can truly walk with someone as a companion on his or her journey we too will be changed. We will learn to respect the process by enduring the discomfort of others. We need to lean into the experience despite all our senses telling us to move on.

The wilderness experience is a powerful experience that is different for everyone. Healing will eventually happen if we allow it to take its course, before new life begins. Jesus experienced his wilderness time and learnt about suffering and endurance, a lesson he would inevitably draw on later in his life.

As we live into our Lenten journey this year, you might take some time to reflect on your own experience of being in the “wilderness of the soul.” As Christians grounded in love and

The Rev. Andrew J Durbidge

The Church of St Luke and St Matthew, Brooklyn

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hope we are well equipped to learn from our experiences and become better companions to those that suffer. Pray for those that you know who are living in their own *wilderness of the soul* time that they may eventually find healing and strength to enter their new life.

Our faith and baptism brings us hope and healing and reassurance that Jesus does indeed know our suffering and through the Holy Spirit, is present with us during our most vulnerable and sad times of life. Let us give thanks for that. Amen