

Deuteronomy 26:1-11
Psalm 91:1-2, 9-16
Romans 10:8b-13
Luke 4:1-13

St. Thomas's Anglican Church

+In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

I was looking in the vestry the other day and noticed the letter by Bishop Asbil restricting the Blood of Christ solely to the priest celebrating the Mass. The letter is dated to <date>. This letter is two years old. I remember the sequence of events well, the Sunday closest to that we had a mass where everyone received the Body alone. We were shut down the Sunday after that, and the Sunday after that we had our first Zoom service. We hoped that we would be back by Easter together, then we pushed that to Pentecost, we finally opened up in a limited fashion in the Fall only to get shut down again before Christmas. I remember that language we used in those early days, we said this would be an extended Lent. Mtr Maggie Helwig, rector of St. Stephen's in the Fields, kept her parish's Lenten array up until September 2020, well past the end of Lent 2020 to reflect that we were in this extended Lent. Though we are in a very different and better place from March 2020, many aspects of the pre-pandemic world are not back. The chalice is still restricted to the celebrating priests, masking is still present in our society, and though we are hoping that the worst is behind us there is always the chance of another major resurgence. Lent mirrors Jesus' 40 days in the wilderness, and this in turn mirrors the Israelite people spending 40 years in the desert before entering the promised land. If our COVID-tide is an extended Lent, it has long gone beyond the 40 days but I hope it isn't like the 40 years of the Israelites.

What have you found in the wilderness over these two years? In ancient times, the wilderness was the liminal place beyond the edges of civilization and society. Moses and the children of Israel encounter God on Mount Sinai and establish the Covenant to prepare them for

their entry to the promised land. John the Baptist preached and baptized in the wilderness. God's raw and untamed power was found in the wilderness, but when Jesus goes there, he finds something different. He finds Satan. The wilderness was the liminal place, the realm of beasts and demons. In ancient Judaism, a goat would be selected on the Day of Atonement to bear the sins of the people on it and would be cast out into the wilderness. Later traditions believed that this goat, would be devoured by the demon Azazel who resided in the wilderness beyond Judea. Centuries later, Early Christian ascetics followed Jesus' example and went into the wilderness, into the mountain caves, necropolises, and abandoned ruins of old forgotten temples to pray and fast, and in their meditations, they too encountered both demons and the fullness of Christ's presence around them.

Satan and Jesus have a contest of sorts in the desert, the devil tempts Jesus and he responds to that. What kind of contest does Jesus have with the devil? Is this contest a great battle two intractable foes, an epic duel of forces of good and evil (one perhaps scored by famed composer John Williams?). No. It is oddly enough a Bible study. Satan's temptations are focused on Jesus' divine and messianic status. He poses a conditional to Jesus, "if you are the Son of God" and then gives Jesus a well thought out and scriptural response to use that divine power to bend reality to his will. Satan is quoting scripture to tempt Jesus, and Jesus returns in kind to resist and rebuke. But underneath this contest we see how Jesus encounters and bears our own temptations and limitation..

Jesus is tempted in the wilderness every way that we are tempted, and in that he shares in our humanity. Our struggles are his struggles because he bears the burden of our humanity. But what is temptation though? Is it the desire to want something? Is that slice of cake in your fridge with its soft texture, chocolaty taste, and rich frosting tempting you right now? I think that

seeing temptation in this way is overly simplistic. There is far more to it than that. There is nothing wrong with being tempted to order pizza for again dinner tonight.

True temptation, the temptations that Jesus fought off in the desert and the true temptations we encounter are ones that lead us away from the fundamental truths of our lives. We are God's children, born in his image and likeness and always worthy of his love. But the true power of temptation is to make us forget that truth about ourselves and one another. Those early Christian ascetics who went into the Egyptian wilderness often became teachers to people seeking deeper wisdom and insight from God, their teachings are recorded in the "Sayings of the Desert Fathers." One monk commented that "There are three powers of Satan that precede all sin: forgetting, negligence and desire. When forgetting comes, it begets negligence and from negligence comes desire: a person falls as a result of desire. But if the mind is on guard against forgetting, it will not become negligent and, if it be not negligent, it will not come to desire. If it does not desire, it will never fall, by the grace of Christ." Though the Devil acknowledges Jesus' divine status as the Son of God, he is tempting Christ by trying to get him to forget his relationship with God and with us. Jesus' is tempted to assume the power to dominate and control the world and all reality by might and power to bend it to his will. Jesus instead came to be the servant of all, and through his sacrifice, redeem us from the powers of Sin and Death. Our temptations, our demons, try to make us forget who we are as Children of God, and by making us forget, we can proceed to do great harm to ourselves and one another.

What have you found in the wilderness over these two years? What demons have you encountered? For me, it was fear and anxiety around catching and spreading COVID-19. Statistically speaking, should I catch COVID I would likely have milder or moderate symptoms, and that was the case even before vaccines were available. No, the fear was spreading it to

people at greater risk for severe symptoms and outcomes, chief among those being our guests at the Friday Food Ministry. Now, caution and prudence in the pandemic is wise and warranted, but my caution grew beyond that and I sequestered myself away at home except for work, groceries, and exercise in fear that if I even took a walk with a friend while masked, I would catch and spread COVID. The fear was that if I made one mistake, it would be a disaster and the temptation was to wallow in the fear isolated and alone. In this paralysis, I was cutting myself off from many of the communities that I was a part of. God made us to be in community with one another and with him because it is in community that we are able to recognize that we are loved and beloved by God, but the temptation made me forget that and thus become isolated and alone.

Now, was there an actual demon in my apartment saying these things to me? No. However we have the capacity to make ourselves into our own personal adversary just fine, and that's what I did to myself. The wilderness though with all its dangers is still also a place of transformation and wonder. Even as the Children of Israel often forgot their Covenant with God, they still had God in their midst, journeying with them in the wilderness. As we find ourselves lost in the wilderness, we are not alone because we find Christ in that wilderness with us. Even in the lowest depths or in the loneliest of places, we are not alone. Christ knew the loneliness and bore it, in doing so he redeemed it. Of course, this may all seem like a simple platitude. It can be hard to acknowledge that God is with us in the midst of such isolation. But these realisations and understanding, though they may seem easy, are actually much harder to integrate into ourselves than we think. In someways it is never truly complete as it is an ongoing process, even for me. I use prayer, particularly the Daily Office, I see a therapist and seek pastoral care, and I am slowly working up the courage bit by bit to continue this journey through the wilderness to find both

Christ and community present within it. There, in the wilderness, we can find a blessed community.

The Lenten season sees us wandering through the wilderness, and it gives us an opportunity to confront the things that make us forget that we are God's children. Disciplines of fasting, charity, and prayer help us to see that which we are missing within our lives because these disciplines strip away the pretensions about ourselves. They help us realize what we have forgotten and remind of our dependency upon God for everything in our lives. We are reminded that we are loved and beloved by God. Even though it has been two years, I think viewing this extended COVID-tide as a long Lenten season helps us to reflect and contemplate on all that has happened. We have wandered through a world of uncertainty, we have experienced and endured much throughout our experiences. Our stories, our experiences, our sorrows, our joys, our struggles, and our triumphs are unique to each of us. Jesus shares in all of these with us. As we slowly emerge from this pandemic in fits and starts, we should share those stories with others because none of us wandered this wilderness truly alone. In sharing our stories, we can rebuild communities that have disappeared or weakened over this time. All of our struggles from the wilderness are borne on Jesus' cross to be redeemed and transformed into something far more than we can imagine. Even the desert can be home to a beautiful wildflower.

What have you found in the wilderness over these two years?

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