

## **Lenten Journey I: The Wilderness**

A sermon preached in Glebe Road United Church

First Sunday in Lent

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Luke 4: 1-13

On Wednesday night, a few of us observed the beginning of Lent with the traditional Ash Wednesday service where, using a mixture of black ash and oil, I made the sign of the cross on hands and foreheads. Lent is a period of 40 days plus 5 Sundays before Easter when we are supposed to repent of our sins, consider our mortality and grow in our understanding of the faith. In the early church Lent was also a time of fasting, and a time of preparation for those wishing to join the church. It was a time when everyone tried to go deeper in their understanding of what it meant to be Christian. The church required attendance at mass, confession and acts of penance on a *daily* basis.

The church of our day has lost most of these ancient traditions. People don't have the time or the interest to become that involved. Most of us are lucky to be in church a few times a month because church is one activity among many others, jostling for time on our agendas. This is the context for Lent in our time and place whether the church likes it or not. I hope you will think of the next five Sundays as a journey in faith as we explore some of the basic themes around what it is possible to believe in a modern multicultural society like ours.

The basics haven't changed. Christians have always believed that we are called to follow this man Jesus of Nazareth, who taught that our God was a God of love, and that to follow this man and obey this God we had to love God and love one another just as intensely as we love ourselves. The church imagines itself in our day as the hands and feet of Christ in our time and place, called to bring the good news to all the earth.

The scripture readings for the next five Sundays have been chosen by the world-wide church to reflect the season of Lent and to provide the basis for our life as the people of God in Christ. The reading for today, the first Sunday of Lent is about the temptations of Christ in the wilderness. Most of the time when we read about Jesus we are confronted by this half-God, half-man person that is a brilliant teacher, a miraculous healer and an inspired leader. We are told that we must follow him but how on earth can we do that? You might as well tell me that I have to play hockey like Sydney Crosby. It's not going to happen, and if I'm silly enough to try, then I'm just going to hurt myself. It would be easier if we had a more realistic picture of Jesus in our heads, a more human Jesus, a more fallible Jesus to begin our journey. And fortunately, that is what we get today. Listen now to Word of God.

Luke 4: 1-13

Lent is a kind of training camp for anyone who wants to follow this Jesus of Nazareth, and we begin with scripture that looks at Jesus before he begins his ministry – no great teachings yet, no healings, no disciples. Just an earnest young man who feels a yearning to do something with his life. He leaves home and disappears into the desert. He needs time by himself to figure out what he will do with his life. He has questions, even doubts about who he is, and what he is supposed to do. This is the kind of person I can relate to; this is the kind of leader that I can imagine following. Because I've been there; we have all been there; in our own deserts, our own wilderness journeys of doubt and questioning. There will be time enough

later for brilliant debates with Pharisees, insights into the nature of God, miraculous healings and acts of great faith.

Let's set the stage. Jesus has just checked out John the Baptist and listened to what he had to say. John's message was depressingly familiar: The world is going to Hell in a handbag; everyone of you is to blame; you had better change your ways because the problems you see now are only the beginning. If John the Baptist were around today he would probably be warning us about the financial collapse of the world economic system caused by the greed of the western, developed world and its banks; he would be pointing out that the world's climate is deteriorating fast because our carbon footprint is too high; he would be reminding us that the world's political systems are close to rupture because of the widening gap between the rich and the poor. Our young man Jesus of Nazareth must have agreed with whatever John said because he presented himself to be baptised. And the scriptures say that during this baptism something happened to this young man. The scriptures say that the heavens were torn apart and the Holy Spirit descended on Jesus like a dove; and a voice from heaven said, "You are my Son, the Beloved. With you I am well pleased." Well, it's hard to know what to make of that, but as far as Jesus was concerned something must have happened because he left home and headed off to the wilderness. And that's where we meet him in today's reading: in a wilderness time of his life. We all end up there sooner or later: times of crisis caused by disappointment, failure or loss. Times of vulnerability and weakness; times of temptation and danger.

It says that Jesus was tempted by the devil. Most of us don't believe in a devil with horns and a forked tail anymore – that's the sort of thing you see in cheesy movies or late night TV. But we probably all know about temptation. So forget the devil if that is a problem for you and insert whatever you think is the source of that temptation, and then listen to what your devil says to Jesus.

"If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread". "If you are so special then make yourself rich". Focus on number one. You deserve a break today. You're worth it! We hear messages like this all the time. Just listen to the ads, the TV commercials, the riot of media assaults that surround our every waking minute. This scripture is right up to date. In 2000 years it is still topical, current, an accurate description of our lives.

Jesus replies that we do not live by bread alone. He doesn't say that we don't need bread because we do. He doesn't say that we should feel guilty because we need bread or money or the things that money can buy. What he says is that money isn't the end of the story. Our desire for stuff can overwhelm us, and become a never ending quest that takes over our lives. We do not live by bread alone.

The devil now takes Jesus to the top of a high mountain and shows him all that nations of the world. And the devil said to him, "To you I will give their glory and all this authority. If you will worship me it will all be yours." "Do you want power and control over other people? Do you want to be famous, looked up to and quoted in the newspapers? You can have all this if you want it. Of course, you have to play the game, you have to compromise your integrity, you have to cheat and not get caught. The Ten Commandments are for losers. Ethical behaviour is out of style and boring. So get with the program, join my team, my company, my political party, and I will make sure that you get elected, that you get the corner office, that you achieve whatever you want.

This was the way the world worked back then, and of course it is the way the world still works. It's almost impossible not to be part of it. And don't imagine that you can escape it by retreating to the church. The clash of egos and political intrigue are just as rampant in the church as they are anywhere else. Again, the scriptures are right up to date.

Finally, the devil takes Jesus to the pinnacle of the Temple in Jerusalem, and tells him, “If you are the Son of God throw yourself down from here. For it is written, ‘He will command his angels concerning you, to protect you,’ and ‘On their hands they will bear you up lest you dash your foot against a stone’”. The devil can certainly quote scripture; this is from Psalm 91: 11-12. But so can Jesus. He quotes Deuteronomy 6:16 to remind the devil that even though he is the Son of God he must not “put the Lord God to the test”. And so much more should we mere mortals not put the Lord God to the test. Belief in God does not mean that God is at our disposal to protect us and save us from the perils of life.

The common thread in all of these temptations is that we human beings are told to put ourselves at the centre of our own personal universe. The devil wants us to think that it’s all about us: our wealth, our power and influence, our welfare. And it’s little wonder that we fall for it. Everything cell of our DNA, and every shred of instinct in our being demands that we listen to this devil. Every living thing has evolved from a battle with other creatures to survive and propagate our species. If our ancestors over millions of years hadn’t been good enough to win this self-centred battle for survival then we wouldn’t be here. The drive to first secure the basics of life and then to accumulate power and influence over others is bred in our bones. Unfortunately, the human creature has now become so powerful and adept at meeting his and her needs and wants that the rest of creation and all of its creatures are in danger of being destroyed. The basis teachings of Jesus tell us that we must humble ourselves, and put God at the centre of our personal universe, which goes against every evolutionary lesson our species has ever learned. “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and love you neighbour just as intensely as you love yourself.”

So our Lenten journey begins in the same wilderness with Jesus where we too are tempted to focus all our energies on ourselves. The devil makes the same pitch to us as he did to Jesus. Look after yourself first. Kill anything and everything that gets in your way. Jesus shows us another way. If we can focus our lives on God and lose some of our ego, we can begin to follow the One who we call the Son of God.

That’s the first lesson, but we must spend our entire lives learning and re-learning it. The world forcefully pushes us in the other direction and we have no choice most of the time except to be swept along in its wake. We begin to push back when we realize what we are doing, often in spite of ourselves. We repent our shortcomings and strive to do better, only to fall again to the forceful temptations of the world. It’s easy to be discouraged, or to waste our energy with feelings of guilt. But if we remember that we are not alone on this journey, then we can muster up the faith required to carry on. And every once in awhile the light breaks through. Things make sense if only for a moment. We begin to see that, whether we know it or not, the whole universe has been constructed in such a way that everything bends in the direction of justice. The mighty are cast down; Empires teeter and fall. And the poor are filled with good things.

The bottom line for this week: Jesus walked out of his wilderness experience into a ministry that would kill him in three short years, but it was a ministry that would change the world, and continues to change the world. We are part of that story. To be continued....

Thanks be to God..

Amen