

February 21, 2010

Scripture: Luke 4:1-13

Sermon: "Preparing a Place for God"

We begin a new season in the church year today. We enter the season of Lent. The season of Lent is supposed to be a time of reflection, meditation, and re-examination of our lives. The season of Lent is a time for introspection. The Season of Lent is a time for us to take up the challenge for where we see brokenness in the world and how we as people of faith have attributed to that brokenness. The Season of Lent begins the journey to the cross. And if we are honest with ourselves it is not a liturgical season that we like very much. It is not as festive as Advent. It is not as awe-inspiring as Pentecost. It is not as ordinary as Ordinary Times. It's Lent: dark, drab, rustic, bare.

The Season of Lent requires us to travel paths that make us uncomfortable. It requires us to do things we would rather not do. It requires us "to ponder what God wills for us and the world; which the Bible names as justice and Jesus called "life abundant." It requires us to ponder what God's love and God's will for us call us to do. How are we to live? How are we to treat the earth, ourselves, and our neighbors? Lent asks us hard questions and leads us down dark paths.

Lent opens the door to some soul-searching that may bring us results that we may not like and may not what to admit are true. We might make some new discoveries about ourselves that are a little uncomfortable, a little unnerving, a little frightening. We might be forced out of comfort zones. We might find that the world that we have created around us that protects is false. And then we will be left with nothing. A very scary place.

But that is what Lent is about. "Lent is an opportunity to re-examine our priorities and reflect on where we place our trust, as well as what holds power in our lives." Lent is a time to get back to the basics. Lent is "not a time to do religious things but [an invitation] to be open to the transformative 'things' God wishes to do for us." Lent is a time of new discovery about how we as people of faith "might practice being both intentional and receptive to God's grace at work in our lives." Lent is a time of discovery, a time for reflection, a time for accountability as people of faith.

And the Season of Lent begins with an invitation, an invitation to be lead by the Holy Spirit into the wilderness where we will for the next forty days grapple with God, wrestle with ourselves, and to face our demons, where we will leave it all behind and see, understand, experience what is real, where we will be transformed, molded, shaped by God's grace and God's love, where we will experience the darkness of the cross. As one author puts it, the invitation of Lent is "Outward bound for the soul." Where we strip away our illusions. We strip away our creature comforts. We strip away our blinders. We strip away everything. And where we are left with just us and God, face to face. Alone in the wilderness with just God. Only us and God together for forty days, exposed, vulnerable, and seemingly helpless. Not the most comfortable place, not the most comfortable position, not the most wanted spot for people who think we are independent, who think we have it all figured out, who think we know who we are and who God is calling us to be.

Lent's invitation is one that we as people of faith really want to refuse but we realize that this wilderness, this wild place, this soul-searching has been a part of our story, a part of The story for a long time. We realize that this wildness, this wilderness finds us on our faith journeys, and shifts our paths on us. One minute, we think we are on a clear, smooth, path that leads to God and then all of a sudden, when life happens, when the unexplainable happens, when the moments of "bad things happening to good people, happen, we find ourselves in the wilderness, struggling, wrestling, being tested, grappling with what we thought we knew about ourselves and what we thought we knew about God and what we thought we knew about faith.

The wilderness finds us. The wildness finds us. The uncertainty finds us because the "wilderness comes in so many shapes and sizes that the only time that we can tell [we] are in one is to look around for what [we] normally count to save [our] lives and come up empty. No food, no earthly power. No special protection." The rugs are pulled out from underneath us and we find ourselves face down in the dirt, in the darkness, in the shadows.

And the good news is that we have been extended an invitation, the invitation of Lent which beckons us, which invites us, which calls us as people of faith that amid the wilderness, amid, the uncertainty, amid the grappling to prepare a place for God.

As we begin this Lenten season and as we accept this invitation into the wilderness, we remember that we are not the first to experience the wilderness nor are we alone. Stories upon stories fill our faith journeys. The Israelites, Jacob, the prophets. Each time they reached a significant moment in their relationship with God, they traveled into the wilderness where they were tested, where they struggled, where they faced their demons. In the wilderness, they worked on their relationship with God, remembering who they were called to be, remembering their story, remembering their purpose. In the wilderness, our ancestors of faith wrestled with God, one on one. In the wilderness, our ancestors of faith embraced their calling, their mission, their purpose as the people of God and what it meant to help bring about the Kingdom of God here on earth. In the wilderness, they took the time to prepare a place for God.

Even Jesus spent time in the wilderness as he began his ministry, as he took up the mantle of leadership, as he came to terms with what it meant for him to be the Son of God. We read in our Scripture today that Jesus after being baptized was lead into the wilderness by the Holy Spirit and for forty days he wrestled with what it meant to be the Son of God. He wrestled with what it meant to embrace his mission of bringing new life to God's people. He wrestled, struggled, grappled and faced his demons. In the wilderness, he prepared a place for God in his life. In the wilderness, he carved out a place in his heart for God. In the wilderness, He readied a place in his life for God and God's word and found the courage to be who God created him to be.

Because here is the Good news: "The spiritual gift the wilderness gives us is the courage to be, the courage to say no to that which will destroy, the courage to go on living as a child of God." The wilderness gives us time as people of faith to reflect on what it means to be the people that God created us to be and the courage to embrace that calling . The wilderness gives us space, away from all distractions, away from the creature comforts that block our view, away from all the walls that we have built up to keep God in God's own place. The wilderness gives us a way to "move forward into a way of live under the rule of God of justice, mercy, and peace." The

wilderness helps us prepare a place for God where we come to realization that to survive in the wilderness, to survive in this world, to survive as people of faith that we must open our eyes to what can be counted on, open our eyes to what is real, open our eyes to what can be trusted and that is God. The God that was in the beginning. The God that is with us now. The God that will be with us in the future.

The wilderness gives us the grace-filled opportunity to leave it all behind and experience God's goodness, God's grace, God's peace, God's love as true, as life-giving, as life-transforming, and REAL. The wilderness gives us the space to really come to terms with what it means to be God's Beloved and to be claimed as God's own. The wilderness gives us the chance to embrace what it means to be the people that God created us to be.

And that is the invitation that is offered to us today. "After being baptized by John in the river Jordan, Jesus went off alone into the [desert] where he spent forty days asking himself the question what it meant to be Jesus. And during Lent, [we as people of faith] are supposed to ask one way or another what it means to be [ourselves]. We are to struggle with who we are but also what we are becoming and what we are failing to become.

We are called to prepare a place for God.

For the next forty days, the invitation is to "remember what it is literally to live by the grace of God alone and not by what we can supply ourselves." The "Wilderness is a wild place, waiting place, a place to grapple with God". The wilderness can be a scary place but hear the Good News: In the wilderness, we are not alone. "God waits for us" in the wilderness, in the desert, in the wildness. In our Scripture today, we hear the invitation: "Come to the desert and I will speak tenderly to your soul." In the wilderness, God is there, guiding us, leading us, protecting us, holding us in the palm of God's hand.

In the wilderness, God is there. "Through hardship, affliction, and calamity, God is there, steadying us through God's transformative love" In the wilderness, God is there, providing, renewing and reviving. In the wilderness, God is there.

May we accept the invitation of Lent to go into the wilderness and, wrestle, struggle, and truly experience what it means to be God's Beloved. Amen.