

Sermon: March 1, 2020 – Matthew 4: 1-11 (Lent I)
Ralph Connor Memorial United Church, Canmore AB – Rev Greg Wooley

The 3rd chapter of Matthew, immediately prior to today's reading, ends with these words: "when Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. ¹⁷ And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased."

Knowing the ministry ahead of Jesus, we current-day readers may want things to get underway immediately for him, to walk the shores of Galilee, preaching and healing and gathering disciples, utilizing this extraordinary, holy experience to energize his mission. But that wasn't the next step. The next step, was to follow the Spirit's leading into the wilderness.

As I have mentioned previously, here in the Bow Valley we hear that Biblical word, "wilderness," quite differently from how it is heard elsewhere in the world, and very, very differently from how it was heard by the first followers of Jesus. For many of us, easy access to wilderness is a significant part of why we live here. Many people here identify the wilderness, with its diverse beauty, as a *place* – or *THE place* - where they experience God, a holy place where they feel most at home, most authentic, most alive. In *this* part of the world, the idea of meeting up with God in the wilderness makes perfect sense.

But the wilderness Jesus went into, was not an attractive place: understood in local superstition as the place where demons and monsters dwell, and by local travelers as the place where bandits hid by the side of the road to rob you of your possessions and perhaps your life. The wilderness of Judea, which starts almost immediately east of Jerusalem and continuing down toward Jericho, is the most forbidding place I have ever visited: barren, desolate, windswept... and holy.

Christened by the actions of John the Baptist and the extraordinary words of the Divine, Jesus was led into wilderness, to prolonged fasting in a place where fears are tested, where hungers and thirsts are immediate, a place of isolation and desolation. Not for an afternoon, not for a weekend, but for more than a month. While us Bible readers are eager for Jesus to immediately get on with his amazing ministry, God is in no such hurry. There is *in-reach* work to be done before the *out-reach* work can begin.

Judaism, Christianity and Islam all, in their own way, are founded by spiritual leaders who emerge from periods of wilderness testing. In many cultures, this work of confronting one's demons and facing harsh physical tests is part of coming-of-age rituals. Yet we, here, are largely disconnected from these traditions of soul-shaping *and that is our loss*, for to do this type of soul work brings you to such an important place: pausing for reflection before leaping into action. Coming to grips with the joys and sorrows of your life narrative. Pondering and confessing and seeking, finding and being found. Going deep with oneself, delving into the very depths of God. All are gifts of entering wilderness, as preparation for unknown roads ahead.

The season of Lent is designed to be such a time each year, a time of self-examination and of deep consideration about the world and one's place in it. Whether accompanied by prayer, or structured devotional practice, or journaling, or spiritual direction, or recovery work, the season of Lent reminds us that the better days ahead are best faced by an honest assessment of self. Fortunately, it happens at a time when the days are getting longer – the words *Lent* and *lengthen* are from the same root – and the additional sunshine and gradual warming of days can help to alleviate the emotional punch of some of the difficult realities that come to light.

This Lent, our Wednesday night Evensong services will consider some authors who help us to go deep into the realities of our lives and the fullness of God's presence, and this morning I too have consulted the wisdom of some trusted authors, as they speak of slowing down, facing

one's fears, preparing to be in deeper one-ness with God. Admittedly, all four of my guides are white, and North American, and 'my age' or a bit older than me, but they are who they are and I'm thankful for the guidance that they bring.

Wayne Muller is my first guide. His book, *Sabbath: Finding Rest, Renewal, and Delight in our Busy Lives* was one of the first books I read last year while on Sabbatical. His examination of the Biblical practice of Sabbath helps me frame Jesus' seeking "time away" before moving headlong into his ministry. "Sabbath time" writes Wayne, "is set aside for remembering the holiness of life. If we speed up and saturate ourselves with accomplishment and worry, we may defile what is sacred with our mindlessness.... *Time, and mindfulness, reveal what is holy.*" (Muller, p. 196)

We take time away from our work – even if our work is positive and life-giving and helpful – to give God a chance to enter all of our life, all of our being, not just our working selves. "We can, over time" he writes, "become enthralled in the trance of our work. It is all-important, it must be done right away, it won't get done without me, I cannot stop or it will all fall apart, it is all up to me, terrible things will happen if I do not get this done." By contrast, "[In Sabbath,] we are valued not for what we have done or accomplished, but simply because we have received the gentle blessing of being miraculously alive." (Muller, pp.210-212)

In taking time away from action and distraction, we can simply be. In being deeply honest with ourselves and with God, we receive the gift of grace, knowing that life is meaningful not because *I* make it so, but because *love* makes it so. When I slow down, disengage, turn my attention somewhere other than the hamster-wheel of busy-ness, I open myself to what is real. Some of that will be gentle and restful; some of it will be hard to face, because I have been trying so hard not to engage it; all of it, will equip me for the journey to come.

Melissa Bane Sevier, is my second guide, and another important voice in my sabbatical last year. Melissa writes a weekly blog about the Sunday gospel reading, and in 2017, she wrote this about today's reading from Matthew:

"Jesus faces several temptations after his formative time in the wilderness. He's learned so much as he's put himself in touch with his calling, his humanity, his spirit, God's spirit. [The] temptation to turn stones into bread is about meeting real needs. Why not take a shortcut if you can and meet those needs faster?

"Why not, indeed?

"Because it's the work that goes into the bread that makes it meaningful, and delicious enough to feed both body and soul. Bread takes time. Place seed in the ground. Wait for rain and sun. Weed and harvest. Thresh and preserve. Grind. Add ingredients. Knead. Bake. Serve. Enjoy. Take leftover seed and place in the ground. Repeat.

"Shortcutting the process of satisfying human hunger (physical or spiritual) means the outcome can't be as meaningful or as effective....We're to reject taking the easy way out when looking for solutions to real problems. Instead, we search for ways that create community, feed body and soul, reach out to the excluded... [slow-unfolding processes like] reconciliation and acceptance."

The famous AA phrase, "half measures availed us nothing" speaks directly to the soul-searching that we can undertake in this season of Lent. Slowing down so that we can intentionally, purposefully live a full life, keeps us from limiting what we will find. Looking ourselves honestly in the mirror now, will help us when we experience even the hardest of realities. The God who calls us to slow down and experience life rather than skirting it, shows the fullness of a life that is rooted in all-present love and filled with God's own healing grace. And while Jesus' journey

was solitary, both Melissa and I would assert that at some point it is helpful to involve trusted companions on this journey, for support and accountability and encouragement.

In her book, *Learning to Walk in the Dark*, **Barbara Brown Taylor** (my third Lenten guide) uses the extended metaphor of ‘walking in darkness’ to describe some of the hardest and most important lessons we will learn in our life’s journey. She ponders the topic of prayer, and our inclination to use prayer as a means to be relieved of or released from our concerns about the world; and having wondered about this, asks these questions: “What if I could learn to trust my feelings instead of asking to be delivered from them? What if I could follow one of my great fears all the way to the edge of the abyss, take a breath, and keep going? Isn’t there a chance of being surprised by what happens next? Better than that, what if I could learn how to stay in the present instead of letting my anxieties run on fast-forward?” (Brown Taylor, pp.75-77)

Barbara stays with these semi-rhetorical questions and – explicitly naming the danger of equating dark skinned people with bad and light skinned people with good - observes that “emotions such as grief, fear, and despair have gained a reputation as ‘the dark emotions’ not because they are noxious or abnormal but because Western culture keeps them shuttered in the dark with other shameful things.... If you have ever spent time in the company of the dark emotions, you too may have received subtle messages from friends and strangers alike that you were supposed to handle them and move on, sooner instead of later. Some of us have even gotten the message that if we cannot do this on schedule, we may not have enough faith in God.” Barbara goes on to speak of how valuable it is, when we learn to embrace the dark.

Her words give a lens for observing the work Jesus was doing in the wilderness. This was a time of staying with emotions rather than running from them, of learning both the trustworthiness of the love of God, and its potential cost. This was not a rosy, happy time for Jesus, for facing the hardest aspects of our lives takes courage and resolve and time. In the depths of God’s love, in our vulnerability, we revisit past or present circumstances or botched opportunities; we name, and perhaps even befriend character traits we dislike; we deal gently with past traumas that need additional support to really deal with. In Lent, in life, as companions on Christ’s path of transformative love, we address our fears and find what else is there.

And finally, guide number four, **Brian McLaren**, whose thoughtful writings help to build bridges between mainline and evangelical Protestant thought and practice. His book *Naked Spirituality* is particularly helpful at this time, not only because of its content but because of its context.

As he was writing this book, a catastrophic earthquake devastated Haiti and caused oil to gush out into the Gulf of Mexico. Each day, news feeds were filled with stories of the rising human death toll, and the scope of environmental damage. As I read Brian’s words they bring to mind the six-to-eight news stories about Coronavirus that lead off our news-by-the-moment, informing us but also raising in us a state of alarm.

Brian recalls simpler days. “In the spiritual spring of Simplicity” he writes, “life is a gentle river in which we flow merrily, and prayer is the song we sing in joy.... Then, in the spiritual summer of Complexity” he continues, “life becomes a stretch of rapids we must run... Through prayer we often shoot the rapids, win the game, master the challenge, regain control.”

But sometimes, bad things happen. Really bad things. And as simplicity gave way to complexity, complexity now gives way to *perplexity*. “After an earthquake” writes Brian, “after a phone call from the police, after a psychiatrist’s or oncologist’s report, after a letter from the board of directors, after an explosion or collapse or meltdown...your little boat of faith springs one leak, then two, then five or seven, and no matter how hard you bail through confession, petition and intercession, you have to acknowledge that the water level is rising, your boat is going down, and the roar of more rapids awaits you downstream.” (McLaren, pp.144-6)

In such times, despair is not far off, and so is the urge to retreat. And at that point, Brian offers this observation “But if we don’t turn back, *if we allow ourselves to go naked into the void*, we render ourselves vulnerable to a strange discovery: that we exist, that God has given us space to exist... To be abandoned is to find out how real you are. God has made you so real that you exist even when alone.... If we dare to persevere, if we dare to keep holding our ‘why’ of lament through the longest, darkest night of the year, morning will come. And when it comes, we will carry a new gravitas, a new substance, a new reality.... We will find the new day is a moment longer, and the next night a moment shorter, and the turning of a season will have begun....” (McLaren, p.177)

By being in wilderness not for an afternoon or a weekend, but for a time that must have seemed endless, Jesus endured the dark night of the soul, confronting temptations specifically tailored to him, suffering hunger and anger and loneliness and tiredness – all the things that make us vulnerable. In the process of going through these things – not around them, and not pretending to engage them – Jesus came to know the depth of love. As we grapple with the issues of our lives, may that deep knowledge emerge for us as well.

....

There is so much more that could be said, but let me sum up with this: the gifts of word and deed in the preaching and teaching and ultimate self-sacrifice of Jesus, were not drawn from an empty well. Neither he, nor we, are capable of giving and giving and giving without replenishment. We affirm that the love we offer, the social engagement we undertake, the words and deeds of our lives, are replenished through our encounters with the holy, encounters that often involve brutally honest engagement with the facts of our lives. We recognize that our own fears, insecurities, regrets, and negative narratives, only serve to separate us from that holy source of love, and honestly addressing those things is both excruciatingly hard, and profoundly rich. We seek to be kind, resilient and truthful, with ourselves, with our community, with our religious life, and that is best done in partnership with the Christ who went deep into the hardest places of life, and emerged with liberation, and life, and love. The season of Lent, this in-between season of the year, as Winter and Spring jostle for position, gives us great opportunity to do this manner of exploration.

In wilderness times, we seek and find; in wilderness times, we are searched for and found. Thanks be to God. Amen.

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