

Lectionary Reflection
Sunday, March 6, 2022
Luke 4:1-13
Deuteronomy 26:1-11

Many years ago, I was asked to facilitate a congregation's fundraising effort. The church had a tradition of distinguished preaching and wonderful music and a storied history as an almost 300-year-old Presbyterian congregation, but they faced complex challenges: an urban context with its concomitant homelessness, violence, and poverty; declining and older membership, their young families moving out of the city because of poor schools; changing neighborhood demographics.

I recall one of the members of the committee saying at an early meeting: "It's like living in a wilderness."

And that gave them the theme of their long-range plan: Journeying through the Wilderness.

The texts for the first Sunday in Lent from Luke and Deuteronomy focus on wilderness and journey motifs, beginning Jesus' own journey that culminates on a Jerusalem hill and tomb, and recalling the wilderness wanderings so central to the grounding story of the Jews.

The journey begins for Jesus in the wilderness. We focus on his three temptations by Satan, often equating them to personal temptations in our lives — diet, use of time, consumption, overwork. Yet for Jesus, they were really temptations about how he would carry out his vocation, how he would live out his identity, how he would use and understand his power, and what the power of God is like.

Context is all-important. In Luke, Jesus' 40 days in the wilderness immediately follow his baptism, the arresting moment when his calling as the Son of God is announced at the Jordan River. And those wilderness days are followed by his inaugural sermon preached before his neighbors in a Nazareth synagogue — received less than enthusiastically, almost getting him thrown over a cliff. The text from Luke centers us in the questions of vocation and identity.

Jesus' temptations are part of a struggle about his calling, about what it means to be the Son of God — and what it does not mean. And for us, what it means to be called disciples of Jesus — and what it does not mean. The focus is not *whether* Jesus is God's Son but *how* he lives out that call. And for us, as individuals or congregations, not whether we are called but how we live out our calling. Just as the long-range planning process was about how a congregation was to live out its calling. About how the church was to live in the wilderness of 21st century secular America. That is a good question for every congregation as we begin the season of Lent.

Note that this work is Spirit-led and Spirit-filled. "Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan." We easily think of the Spirit working in us in times of well-being and joy. Yet, the text is clear: Jesus was filled with the Holy Spirit at his baptism and was led by that very Spirit in the wilderness. The presence of God's Spirit is with us deeply in times of turbulence. The work of discerning a calling and following it is spiritual work.

Turning to the text from Deuteronomy, this lection also offers reflection on the themes of journey and identity. The early creed embedded in the Deuteronomistic Code recites the historic and

identity-shaping journey of the Jews out of Egypt and through the wilderness to a promised land flowing with milk and honey. They are on a pilgrimage to a specific site – “the place that the Lord Your God will choose as a dwelling for his name” – where they remember their ancestors (also wanderers) and offer the first fruits of their harvest. The ritual of remembering their past confirms and strengthens their identity for the journey ahead, which does not end with finding the Promised Land. So our weekly worship on the Sabbath gives us the chance to stop, rehearse the story of who we are and what God has done for us in the past, offer our gifts, and look to our calling for the future.

There are several other things to note in the texts. First, celebrating God’s goodness and bounty is important. Celebrating in meals both sacramental and for daily bread. Celebrating by sharing our stories. Celebrating in an inclusive community. And with whom do we celebrate? Deuteronomy is clear — with aliens and Levites, adding in the two verses following the lectionary text the giving of our bounty to “orphans and widows so that they may eat their fill within your towns.” We hear the clarion voice of Jesus’ teaching about ministering to the alien, the outsider, the poor, the diseased, the tax-collector, the Samaritan. As we leave the liturgy each week, we would do well to remember those who wait outside the sanctuary doors, who populate our cities and towns if not our churches. The homeless, the poor, the mentally ill, the addicted, the victims of gun violence, the elderly who are alone.

Second, we are called to remember who we are and whose we are. All along the way, both in Jesus’ 40-day desert and the Jews’ 40-year wilderness sojourns, God is present, giving refuge, sustenance, and protection.

Finally, following the Jesus of the Judean desert and his ancestors, the Jews of the exodus wilderness, we realize that we are all migrants. That our journey Godward never ends. “Migrant,” “immigrant,” and “alien” are self-descriptive words. We are a people on the way, and some parts of that way are wilderness lands. As Lent begins, we enter the wilderness to again find our calling and learn how to follow.

Questions for reflection:

1. Reflect on whether you and/or your congregation are in a wilderness time as you begin Lent. Describe what that wilderness looks like.
2. Who are your ancestors in faith, the “wandering Arameans” in your history? What gifts have they given you, and how do you celebrate and share those gifts?
3. As you walk with Jesus in the wilderness, how do you understand your identity and your calling as a disciple? What kind of powers tempt you away from this identity and calling?
4. How would you describe yourself or your congregation as a migrant?

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