

March 9, 2025
The First Sunday in Lent – Year C
Trinity, St. Louis
The Rev. Dr. Paul Jacobson, *Rector*

Deuteronomy 26:1-11

Psalms 91:1-2, 9-16

Romans 10:8b-13

Luke 4:1-13

In the Name of the God of all mercy. Amen.

Today, we hear about Jesus, freshly baptized, being led into the wilderness by the Spirit, where he stayed for 40 days. I suspect that most of us – when we find ourselves on the edge of the wilderness, or deep in the middle of one – can hardly believe that God would ever lead us to such a place...or that we would choose to remain.

We all have some experience of wilderness. I invite you to take a moment and think what your wilderness might look like... A hospital ER or ICU? Your living room at 3am when your spouse or your child haven't come home? The parking lot where you couldn't find your car on the day you lost your job? The back seat of a patrol car? Perhaps your wilderness is the one in the middle of your own chest, when you begged for a word from God but heard nothing but the wheezing bellows of your own lungs.

In the wilderness we hear about today, Jesus is stretched between two conflicting voices: the voice of God and the voice of the devil. On one hand there is the assuring voice of God, who, as we heard in the Psalm, promises to protect, answer, and deliver.

On the other hand, and using the same words, there is the mocking voice of the devil that seduces and taunts with shiny promises and slick invitations.

Lent is a time for listening to the voices of promise *and* seduction, and learning how to judge between them. A quick look around the globe will reveal that the human family seems to be careening towards the tempting promises that might make right and that only aggression and empire will save us (at the expense of them). And the list of world leaders dancing to this particular devil's tune seems to grow daily.

But we delude ourselves if we imagine that we, too, don't feel our ears tickled by those cynical whispers, "it's all up to you; you don't have to be hungry; you don't have to be powerless; you don't have to be fragile and finite; just take whatever you want."

Jesus's struggle in the wilderness brings the story of human temptation full circle. Remember the questions that the serpent posed to Adam and Eve in the lushness of Eden? "Don't you want to be like God?" "Don't you want to know what God knows?" "Don't you want to avoid death?"

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We call this season Lent, from the Old English word *lencten*, this time of lengthening days. In the natural world, we see the flowers of spring, like the insistent crocuses by the office entrance. In the spiritual world, it is the season for the greening of the human soul.

Every successful gardener knows the value of pruning shears, but Evelyn Underhill, an English spiritual writer from the first half of the 20th century, reminds us that there are different ways of tending both the physical and spiritual soils. She writes:

“The idea that a good vigorous campaign with a pitch fork is the best way of extirpating tiresome weeds from a herbaceous border is the one we most have to unlearn. We plunge in, toss the ground violently in every direction, pluck out the weeds, make a great pile, and retire in a state of moist satisfaction saying we’ve done a very good morning’s work.”

“But have we? We’ve disturbed the roots of the best perennials. We’ve grubbed up loads of little modest seedling(s)...And in our hurry, we’ve broken weeds and left the bottom half of their stems in the ground to start vigorous life again.”¹

When I heard these words read by Carlos Daughaday on Thursday morning, I remembered hot and humid summer days when it was my task to rid the seemingly massive yard of our home in Florissant of every dandelion and clump of crabgrass. I was content to remove the superficial evidence of blemishes in our suburban lawn. My father, on the other hand, was not best pleased when the deep roots reasserted themselves.

Vigen Guroian, an Armenian-American Orthodox theologian of our own time, takes up this theme. “Like the deep-rooted thistle weed, some of our worst habits withstand all but the most persistent, persevering, and strenuous exercise. A quick pull on the root, however, will not do the trick, nor will an aggressive chop of the hoe. Patience is needed, and the humble willingness to drop to one’s knees and work carefully with the hand fork and the trowel. The Christian gardener patiently picks sin from the soul’s soil and cultivates it with care and attention to the tender new growth of faith.”²

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When the Spirit leads you into the wilderness, instead of thinking of a time of punishment, perhaps you can imagine a time of pruning away the old, the extra, the

¹ Evelyn Underhill, *The Ways of the Spirit* (1990) edited by G. A. Brame.

² Vigen Guroian, *Inheriting Paradise: Meditations on Gardening* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), pp. 22-23.

useless – all those things that insulate you from each other; and isolate you from God – all those things we prayed about in the Great Litany, a sort of spiritual spring cleaning.

During those forty days – and remember that he stayed the entire time – Jesus learns how to experience God’s love in a bleak and lonely wasteland. He learns to hear, clearly, God’s quiet voice of assurance, and to recognize its shiny counterfeit, as well. Jesus’ identity as God’s Child and Beloved is tested and strengthened. Jesus learns to trust that he can be, that he is, beloved *and* famished, precious *and* insignificant, valued *and* vulnerable, all at the same time.

What can the wilderness teach you this year? How can Lent be of use to you? One of the reasons people give things up in Lent is to remove some of the props and diversions, some of the habits and comforts, of the everyday world.

And within that freed-up space, this space, you might be able to lean in, learning to listen through the static, to discern between the assuring voice of God and the slick voice of the devil with its empty promises. And, as you lean in, you will get a glimpse of the promise that, in whatever wilderness you are flailing around, God is present.

Does this mean that God wills bad things to happen to you? That God wants you to suffer? I think that answer is no. Does it mean that God can redeem even the most barren periods of your life? That, if you choose to pay attention, to be patient, your wilderness can become holy even as it remains precarious? That answer, I think, is yes.

Patience? Really? Now? When the world seems to be going to hell in a handbasket, he’s going to talk to us about patience? It’s too Goody Two-Shoes, too head-in-the-sand. Who wants to be patient? There’s so much work to be done.

Let me be clear. To be patient is not to be passive; it is not to sit on your hands, it most certainly is not to be silenced or erased. To be patient is to be diligent, to be faithful to the task of spiritual gardening.

When I decided that my addictions were probably going to kill me, I was blessed to be led to 12-Step programs. I thought, “I’m really smart, and I can knock out these 12 Steps in a jiffy.” Long-timers said, “we wish you slow recovery.” “Slow recovery,” I said to myself, “what the heck is that? I’ve done so much damage, and I need to put things right super-fast.”

After a decade, I can almost chuckle at my ignorance and arrogance, remembering how I took a pitchfork to my herbaceous border. It was only after the weeds of my life kept reappearing that I realized I had to be patient – to pay attention to all those little thorns of brokenness in my soul’s soil.

Only then did the promises of a sober life begin to bud and blossom. My life remained precarious for years, but it had been made holy. Mine, like so many, is a story of spiritual transformation. It is also a story of privilege.

But there are other stories – stories of those who surround us whose lives have been made holy by patience, but which remain far too precarious after generations. These are the stories of the disinherited.

On Friday, we observed the 60th anniversary of Bloody Sunday, when the first of three non-violent marches from Selma to Montgomery was cut short by state troopers and local deputies, who attacked about 600 unarmed protesters with batons and tear gas after they crossed the Edmund Pettus Bridge.

That day changed the course of the Civil Rights Movement, resulting in the Voting Rights Act of 1965. But the last six decades have demonstrated, painfully, that the tap roots of “not you, me first” run deep, and continue to choke out the progress that patience once won.

We still have tough questions to ask. How are we, in our own day, called to the discernment of voices, and called to diligence on behalf of all those Children of God that the world wants to devalue and demonize – those who must bear alone a long and savage lent.³ How are we called to pay patient attention to the roots and thorns and rocks of brokenness in our common soil and cause good trouble at the same time?

I don’t know all the answers. Most days, I’m not sure I know any of them. What I am sure of is that God is with us in the asking, and in the work to create the Beloved Community.

When you received the cross of ashes on your forehead on Wednesday, you were invited to remember your humanity. Lent is not about doing penance for being human. Rather, Lent is a time to embrace both our reliance on God, and all that it means to be human. Human and hungry. Human and vulnerable. Human and beloved. Human and one with another. Human with all others as Children of God.

A blessed Lent to you all. Amen.

³ From *My Open Letter to all Christian Clergy for Lent* by Sister Lou Ella Hickman, OVISS.