

Collect of the Day: Almighty God, whose Son fasted forty days in the wilderness, and was tempted as we are but did not sin, give us grace to discipline ourselves in submission to your Spirit, that as you know our weakness, so we may know your power to save; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

Luke 4:1-13: Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, where for forty days he was tempted by the devil. He ate nothing at all during those days, and when they were over, he was famished. The devil said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread." Jesus answered him, "It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone.'" Then the devil led him up and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. And the devil said to him, "To you I will give their glory and all this authority; for it has been given over to me, and I give it to anyone I please. If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours." Jesus answered him, "It is written, 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.'" Then the devil took him to Jerusalem, and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to 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, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone." Jesus answered him, "It is said, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'" When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time.

Sermon: The Wilderness - by P. Woolley Lent 1C

The first verse of the Gospel that we read today says, "Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness".

There are many types of wilderness, in Canada we have vast amounts wilderness. There are large tracts of wilderness that have never had a human foot within their bounds. There are great areas of snow, thick forests, endless muskeg and bog. Such is the geographical reality of this land.

The wilderness referred to in the Gospel, is however, the type most often found in the middle east. Vast areas of desert and semi desert, arid and forlorn places with little vegetation, devoid of moisture. Any desert area is a place of extremes, soaring temperatures during the day and bone chilling drops in the mercury through the night. In areas where the ground is mostly dry sand there is little that can hold the heat. An example of this is one of the areas where I used to do chaplaincy work for the military during the summers. The area is a training area called Blackdown Park, inside the boundary of CFB Borden, near Barrie. Blackdown is a large basin of sand with a thin

layer of earth that has been placed on top in many of the areas. This top layer is only an inch or two thick, placed there to grow grass in attempt to keep the sand in place. The result of this sand and the dryness is to produce a microclimate. During some of the August nights, the temperature would plunge to 45 degrees, while 6 km up the road at the main base it was 85 degrees. That area is a micro-desert.

There are many great deserts in the world, we know the names of many of them, Sahara, Gobi, Serengeti, and the Great Deserts of the American South West. With global warming many deserts are growing at an alarming rate. This is a process called desertification.

But there are deserts and wildernesses of a different kind, places that are not geographical areas, but are still places of extremes.

These wildernesses are metaphorical, using modern terminology we might call them 'virtual' wildernesses or virtual deserts.

Some of these are the wildernesses of:

Despair, Grief, Infirmary, Addiction, Frustration, Loss of Faith, and Confusion

These too are places of extremes, these are the places caused by events in our life, places caused by our behaviours and our dysfunctions that we seem powerless to change, and places imposed on us by the dysfunctions of others.

These wildernesses are lonely places, seemingly devoid of life, they are places that are often hard to negotiate a path out of them and back to wholeness. They are places where we need to avoid the temptations of quick answers and symptomatic fixes.

Yet, spending some time in the wilderness can actually help us to focus, to find out who we really are, and what is important to us.

When I think of people who used their wilderness experience in constructive ways, I think of John the Baptist, and generations of Christian monastic orders throughout the ages, the ancient religious movement called the Essenes, (who many believe included John the Baptist and his followers), and indeed as we read in today's gospel Jesus.

In a wilderness there is:

Isolation

Little in the way of distractions

A time of being alone with oneself and with God in a more intimate way.

There is time to distill our problems and concerns into their very essence.

Time to look at things in a non symptomatic way, to understand the root causes of whatever is distracting us from health and wholeness.

In the Gospel we hear that Jesus was *led by the Spirit in the wilderness*. The Spirit acted in the life of Jesus. The Spirit acts in our life also. When we are in the wilderness, real or virtual we too are being led by the spirit. It might be that the Spirit not only leads us in the wilderness, it might be that the Spirit leads us **into** the wilderness, so that we might find wholeness.

In the wilderness Jesus was tempted by the Tempter. These temptations were the most seductive of temptations, the promises of absolute power, prestige, magic, and invincibility. These are some of the temptations that have caused the greatest problems in history. Jesus, guided by the Spirit knew that none of these temptations were paths on the journey to wholeness. Jesus could not be tempted.

The season of Lent which we have just entered is to be for each of us a 'liturgical wilderness' which we impose upon ourselves. Lent is a time and space in which we are called to examine all of the things in our lives:

That tempt us, and lead us into error;

The things that are excessive and unnecessary;

Everything that attempts to draw us off of the path to wholeness and faith.

In the wilderness of Lent, we can:

- Spend some time in meditative isolation

- Try to be aware of distractions

- Spend time being alone with ourselves and with God in a more intimate way.

- Take time to distill our problems and concerns into their very essence.

- Take time to look at things in a non symptomatic way;

- Take time to understand the root causes of whatever is distracting us from health and wholeness.

This is all to say that Lent is a time for us to examine what we need to change in our lives to become more human, more Christ like.

Lent is a time for us to be open to the workings of the Holy Spirit, to let the Spirit inspire us. May you have a holy lent and may you be led into the 'wilderness that is Lent' so that you might be able to focus more clearly on God and what God wants for you and your life of faith. Amen.