

Luke 4:1-13 Pastor Bill Uetricht 1 Lent 2/21/10

There are some Biblical texts that just grab me, energize me. The first lesson from Deuteronomy is one such text. The lesson describes what worshipers are supposed to say when they bring their offering to the Festival of First Fruits. The reading is all about gratitude, gratefulness for the gift of the land and the fruit that it provides. It is all about connecting to the huge story of Israel—a story that is said to be **my** story, **our** story, even though the story happened a long time ago, among people who lived a long time ago. I love the historical consciousness in this text. I love the sense of being a part of a huge narrative, especially in light of the fact that in our day we get stuck on puny stories—puny stories about Tiger Woods and John Edwards and Sarah Palin and her family. A big narrative about oppression and freedom, gift and gratitude, land and provision, seems the right antidote to the kinds of stories we hear on a regular basis. So you'd think that I would want to preach on this Deuteronomy text. But after looking in my file drawer I discovered that I had preached on this lesson at least seven times. I have been grabbed and energized by this reading throughout my preaching career. I guess I could say that at least I am consistent!

I have consistently avoided the text from Luke, the well-known passage about the temptation of Jesus. I could only find one sermon about it, from 1986, I think. What's the deal? In part I know that talking about temptation annoys me a bit because in our culture temptation always seems to be connected with morality. Giving into temptation is eating that dessert you shouldn't, having those naughty thoughts that you shouldn't have, doing those naughty things that you shouldn't do. Oh that so trivializes temptation! It domesticates it. So I think I have

avoided the text from Luke because in our culture temptation has been such a puny story.

But frankly, I could have said that in a sermon. I could have talked about its deeper character. I could have pointed out that for Jesus temptation was not about morality but about who he is. “If you are the Son of God,” the devil says. The temptations that he faces are about his identity. Who will he be? What will it mean for him to be the Son of God?

I could have preached on that, but I didn’t. What’s the deal? Maybe, just maybe—I am not sure about this—I simply didn’t want to go to the wilderness, the place that Luke takes us for Jesus’ temptation. You know, I am an extroverted kind of guy. I like people. I like being around them. I am energized by them. And I have maintained a relatively intense schedule for most of my life, filling most of my moments. Go to the wilderness? It’s kind of quiet there. Sometimes it is even lonely. What would I do with myself with all that silence, all that aloneness? I don’t know. Maybe it’s time to go there.

Now I know that Ken preached a solid and articulate sermon on the wilderness a few months back during the season of Advent. It always intrigues me how closely connected Advent and Lent are. Ken mentioned in his sermon how many of us live our lives in the context of the wilderness experience, something that we don’t always intend. We just find ourselves there. Life happens. But today the wilderness experience seems to be much more about intention. The church intentionally, purposefully, takes us to the wilderness at this time of the year. Lent is a purposeful time. The stories of heroes throughout history often include a reference to a purposeful experience in the wilderness. Jesus, in Luke, has just been declared the Son of God, the

beloved one, at his baptism. Now what will that mean? The wilderness will be the place where he purposefully struggles with what it means to be the Son of God. Now honestly, I think that struggle was a life-long struggle for him, not a one-time event. **And** it appears that this struggle is one that God intends for him. “Jesus,” the text says, “full of the *Holy Spirit*, returned from the Jordan, [where he was baptized], and was led *by the Spirit* in the wilderness.” This wilderness thing seems to be a God thing.

But I try to avoid the wilderness, often like the plague. And let’s face it. I/We have at our disposal all kinds of things to make sure we never go there. Call those things cell phones, I-pods, computers, Blackberries, televisions, fast food, sex without commitment. I don’t have to be alone in a long car ride any more. I can talk to someone all the time. I don’t have to eat a meal in silence any more, really tasting the food that I am tasting, smelling the smells that I am smelling. No, I can be distracted by a computer, by a television. I don’t have to feel the aloneness that I feel when I am in a crowd of people. I can text all that I want to people who are not there. I don’t have to feel those little hunger pangs anymore. The fast food establishment can take care of those pangs all the time—24 hours a day. I don’t have to sense the pain that sometimes comes from committed relationships. Sex can be available to me all day long. My, what a partner the computer can be! We have all kinds of ways to make sure that we don’t go to the wilderness.

Barbara Brown Taylor, and my wife before I confronted Taylor’s thought, described these ways as “pacifiers.” Taylor says that when we start feeling too empty inside, “we stick our pacifiers into our mouths and suck for all we are worth.” To make sure we don’t go to the

wilderness we employ all kinds of means to distract us. We are a nation of distracted people. We purposefully try to avoid those places where we might have to confront ourselves, life as it really is, God himself. Taylor says, however, that all of our avoidance techniques, all of our pacifiers “do not nourish us, but at least they plug the hole.”

Did you notice how the devil wanted to plug the hole in Jesus? Jesus, make your life all about bread, all about economics. Suck on that pacifier. Jesus, make your life all about political power. I’ve got the power, so I think. I can give it to you. All authority and glory can be yours. Suck on that pacifier. Jesus, make your life about religious power, about dazzling miracles. Suck on that pacifier.

No, he says! The hole in me can only be filled by God. “One does not live by bread alone. Worship the Lord your God, and serve *only* him. Do not put the Lord your God to the test.” The wilderness is not about an experience with pacifiers, but with God. The wilderness is about discovering who you truly are, what it means to be who you are, what it means to be a child of God, when everything is stripped away. The wilderness is a time to learn to live life without all the props, all the distractions, all the layers. Believe it or not, some of the most energizing experiences that I have had have been alongside people who are dying. All they have left is their trust. All they have left is their status as children of God.

We’re beginning Lent. We are purposefully setting aside 40 days to enter the wilderness. I probably don’t like to go there. I can probably find all kinds of distractions that help keep me from going there. But how about this? How about going there with me? Oh, I know that the issues I have to deal with are different than your issues. I know that the distractions I will try to live into will be different than

your distractions. But can we go there together, nonetheless? The church has been intentionally going there for centuries. The church, the faith community, has discovered for centuries that, full of the Holy Spirit, blessed with the gifts of baptism, it, we have been led by the Spirit in the wilderness. The wilderness is not God-abandoned. It is God-saturated.

Our big story seems to suggest that. Our ancestor, Jacob, was a *wandering* Aramean. He went down into Egypt and there lived as an alien. And there he became a great nation, mighty and populous. But you guessed it. Things went downhill. The Egyptians treated us harshly, enslaved us, imposing hard labor on us. We cried to the Lord, the God of our ancestors in the midst of this desert. And the Lord heard our voice, saw our affliction. The Lord took us out of the wilderness in Egypt and then sent us out into a new wilderness for forty years. We wandered there until we were brought into this land, a land flowing with milk and honey.

We've been going into the wilderness for a long time. And you know what? God has been there *all* the time. We have been led by the Spirit in the wilderness for a *long* time. Maybe, then, it's okay for you and me to go there. Maybe it's more than okay. Maybe it's where we need to go. Let's go there together.