

Deuteronomy 26: 1-11
Psalm 91 1-2, 9-16
Luke 4: 1-13, Year C

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St. Peter's Glenside
March 6, 2022

The Wilderness

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of all our hearts be acceptable to you, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

It has only been four days since the words “from dust you come and to dust you shall return” were said as ashes were smeared on foreheads and took root in our hearts as we set out on the 40 days of Lent: our pilgrimage with Jesus to the cross.

And with each passing day, we watch Ukraine, a proud and free democracy, being reduced to rubble and ash.

We have all been hurled into the wilderness, just as Jesus was immediately after his baptism. We are asked to say who we are. Claim our identity.

Ukrainian President Voldymar Zelensky is a 44 year-old Jew. Several of his family members fought, and died, fighting the Nazis during the Holocaust.

Zelensky has told the world who he is, know it will in all likelihood cost him his life. Think of the temptation when he was told he could have safe passage out of his country. He declined in those now famous words: I don't need a ride, I need ammunition.

The wilderness, that place of abandonment, desolation, and brokenness, is where we crash into evil. It may not come as dramatically as war, but it will come to all of us. One way I think of evil is as violence that betrays love. Like an anvil had hammers out our souls, the wilderness is where we find out who we are.

“Full of the Holy Spirit,” Luke’s gospel tells us, “Jesus was led into the wilderness.” Does “led” mean God’s intention was for Jesus to suffer? I don’t believe so. But I do believe, that God knew that if Jesus was to become fully human, pain and suffering were inescapable. Jesus knew who God was. But did he know who he was in this world? Lutheran pastor Nadia Bolz-Weber describes it like this in her book *Pastrix*.

Identity. It's always God's first move. Before we do anything wrong and before we do anything right, God has named and claimed us as God's own. But almost immediately, other things try to tell us who we are and to whom we belong: capitalism, the weight-loss industrial complex, our parents, kids at school — they all have a go at telling us who we are. But only God can do that. Everything else is temptation...and maybe just moments after Jesus' baptism, when the devil says to him, 'If you are the Son of God,' he does so because he knows that Jesus is vulnerable to temptation precisely to the degree that he is insecure about his identity and mistrusts his relationship with God. So if God's first move it to give us our identity, then the devil's first move is to throw that identity into question.

It's significant that Jesus does not begin his healing, preaching, and teaching ministry until after his 40 days in the wilderness. Writer Daniel Gauss reminds us his article, "Satan as Trickster," that:

Jesus fasted 40 days, Noah sailed 40 days, Moses fasted 40 days on a mountain, Israelites wandered 40 years, Buddha began teaching at 40, Mohammed began teaching at 40. It looks as if, in sacred literature, before someone can do something significant, it is necessary to spend forty days or years in preparation. The number 40 is used, therefore, to describe a transitional situation – sort of a gestation period

Transformation comes in the wilderness. Several months after her son died, I remember talking with a mother about how life was different. She was looking for a way to do something in memory of her son and said, "Bread must be broken before it can be served." Emerging from the wilderness, she had resisted grief's temptation to turn away from God remaining broken and bitter. But she chose to honor her son by serving others.

I know in my own life, that in breaking apart I was broken open by the wilderness. During a time that was dark and difficult, I felt trapped and alone. Weary and needing to sit down, I wandered into a church with my small daughter and sat in the chapel where the noon Eucharist was beginning. I hadn't been going to church on a regular basis for more than a decade. When we knelt at the communion rail, a priest put his hands on my daughter's head and blessed her. His words about the light she would bring into the world sliced my heart open. It was at that moment that the God I wasn't looking for found me.

That didn't mean my life suddenly became easier. What it meant was I knew in my bones and with every breath I would continue to take in the next 36 years, that I was not alone. And that changed everything. I would not be a priest had it not been for the wilderness.

The point for me is that whether we are led there or land there, the wilderness is a place of crucifixion and resurrection.

Jesus healing, teaching, and preaching began after his 40 days in the wilderness and he died on the cross about 1,000 days later. Writes Debie Thomas in *Journey with Jesus*:

The uncomfortable truth about authentic Christian power is that it resides in weakness. Jesus is lifted up — but he's lifted *up on a cross*. His power is the power of self-surrender for the sake of love.

Self-surrender for the sake of love. In the days and weeks ahead, we will bear witness to the consequences of President Zelensky's self-surrender for the sake of love.

Both he and Vladimir Putin have told us who they are. Now the world is asked to say who we are.

What will happen in our world during these next 40 days is beyond our control. But what we choose to do this Lent up to us.

Try to think of Lent not as a burden, but as a beginning when we choose to enter the wilderness. A sacred time apart where a doorway opens:

In her poem, "Praying," Mary Oliver wrote:

It doesn't have to be
the blue iris, it could be
weeds in a vacant lot, or a few
small stones; just
pay attention, then patch

a few words together and don't try
to make them elaborate, this isn't
a contest but the doorway

into thanks, and a silence in which
another voice may speak.”

AMEN

Bolz-Weber, Nadia, *Pastrix*, Hachette Book Group, 2017

Satan as Trickster in the Desert: An Experiment in Non-literal Interpretation
by [Daniel Gauss](#), ProgressiveChristianity.org, February 5, 2021

Oliver, Mary, *Thirst*, Beacon Press, 2007

Journey with Jesus: Debie Thomas, February 23, 2020