“A Wilderness Time Out”

A sermon preached at Lawrence Park Community Church

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Scripture: Matthew 4: 1 - 11

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Last Sunday we entered into the season of Lent in a rich and meaningful worship experience. Prior to the depth of study that we receive as seminarians, I never fully understood or indeed appreciated the significance of this season from an individual perspective. Here in this Lenten season we are invited to a *time out* for the very personal process of self-examination and introspection. Lent is primarily a season for repentance and reconciliation. These practices sound heavy going but over the years they have taken on more authenticity in that they are considered necessary to health and wellness. Over the years of ministry I have asked myself a recurring question: “Has the need to preach a gospel of encouragement and comfort negated a gospel that also addresses the concept of wrongdoing, forgiveness, and the making of amends?” I suggest that both are required to fully communicate the totality of the gospel message for our lives. Today the essence of this Lenten season continues in the context of liturgy in hymn, prayer, and scripture. We have revisited the familiar gospel story according to Matthew in which we find Jesus alone in the wilderness and experiencing outlandish temptations. It is great storytelling and an extreme embellishment of the concept of temptation. Hence this season is often referred to as our wilderness experience. The word Lent may actually derive from the Latin word *lentare* which means *to bend*. This reinforces Lent as a time of preparation for personal and collective transformation. Possibly a time for us to be willing to bend from our ways of doing and thinking and entertain new ways that will be more life-giving. Lent becomes the time to look truthfully at ourselves and make whatever changes are necessary.

The biblical theme for Lent is the journey to Jerusalem. As Jesus turned toward Jerusalem and contemplated what awaited him there, we turn to face our own vulnerability. Authors Louise Mangan and Nancy Wyse, in sharing some theological reflection on the season of Lent, describe for us what that might look like and say: “We come to healing and wholeness by allowing our former self to come apart.” Well your reaction this morning to this statement may be the same as what mine was in that it seems to connote a total unhealthy breakdown as like a self-implosion. However the authors provide elaboration which gets to the heart of their point by saying that “We have to let go of many kinds of illusions which hold our *false* sense of security together. We have to let go of false attachments – anything to which we attach our souls instead of to God. We have to be open to what’s real and face the shadows.”

I think it is fair to say that there is an increasing number of persons within the church who are uncomfortable with the image of a cross and particularly with the concept that the cross of Jesus and his unimaginable suffering was for us. I speak to the subject of atonement, the idea that Jesus was sacrificed for our sins. For some, this notion of salvation from sin creates a perpetual sense of unhealthy guilt. The metaphor used to describe Jesus as *the Lamb of God* reinforces the concept of sacrifice. It is a recurring theme in the Hebrew Scriptures commencing with the story of Abraham almost killing his son Isaac to confirm his faith in God.

And so in their writings, the authors of the Gospels, in order to elevate the significance of the person and ministry of Jesus made use of the concept of sacrifice and applied it to him. I believe that it is quite justifiable to question whether Jesus would have wanted his crucifixion and death described as our ultimate responsibility. That is indeed a heavy cross to bear.

The late Marcus Borg, a highly regarded theologian, when speaking of Jesus’ death within the context of substitutionary atonement (that is Jesus died for our sins), says “I think that it’s bad theology because it elevates one understanding of Jesus’ death above all others and makes it normative. Moreover, it says something both limiting and negative about God. It limits God by saying God can forgive sins only if adequate payment is made. It is negative in that it demands a death – somebody must die. It implies that the death of Jesus, this immeasurably great and good man, was God’s will, God’s plan for our salvation.”

Rev.Don Murray is a friend and colleague in ministry. He is now retired in Nova Scotia and writes a column for the Truro News. In one of his Lenten columns he says: The church has tended to zero in on our failures and shortcomings. It has pointed out to us in very clear terms what terrible sinners we are. Many people have been left with feelings of guilt and unworthiness that have undermined their self-confidence and cast a dark shadow over their lives. Far from saving them it has cast them into an emotional hell.” Well, in case you think that Don is a heretic, I ask you to contrast Jesus’ invitation for us to experience life abundantly against this perpetual backdrop of the burden of guilt. If God loves us unconditionally then try explaining to an impressionable child that parent God arranged for a son, named Jesus, to die for his or her sins? Yes, even when we remove the mystery and the theological implications from this concept, then that is exactly what we are asking a child to believe.

Lent is a time which calls us specifically to take account of our human condition in the privacy of our own wilderness experience. I say this because it is only in the private interior of our own hearts that we come to face with the measure of our own authenticity. This season is when we set aside all that gets in the way of our relationship with God and with each other. It is a time to be still and to be receptive to whatever God may need to communicate to us. Lent is a period which is identified with several behaviours which take on more prominence. It is a time of penance, often in the form of sacrifice, and we have become accustomed to the idea of giving up something, whether that be chocolate or perhaps a bad habit, the latter of which should of course be more permanent! I am reminded of a letter seeking advice from Ann Landers: “Does my girlfriend still love me? She’s given me up for Lent!” Lent was earlier associated with almsgiving, that is giving to the poor. Also, more focus was given to religious exercises such as meditation and Bible study. In summary, this Lenten season is essentially a time out to refocus from ourselves to others and to God.

Turning to the gospel reading, the author of Matthew provides an elaborate and extraordinary story outlining the ways in which Jesus was tempted and his responses. He was tried and tested in a vision during the forty days in the wilderness. It is said that fasting can bring on visions and hallucinations. As such, it was not out of the realm of possibility that Jesus imagined these temptations. Or I suggest to you that what we have here in this Gospel passage is pure storytelling intended to explain the self-talk that Jesus and we in turn experience when faced with temptation.

Bear in mind that Jesus was extremely popular. His growing number of followers saw him as a Saviour, not from sin I might add, but from the Roman occupation and oppression. He was known to have special powers of healing and he performed miracles. Interestingly enough in this desert scenario, or more accurately, in this internal dialogue, the three things that tempt Jesus are things we’re all tempted by or need to some extent: we all need our *daily bread*; from time to time it is difficult to not want a sense of control or power; and most of us have been tempted to *test* God at least once. So taking this one step further from Jesus’ standpoint and using some imagination, United Church minister Audrey Brown makes an interesting point in saying: “The temptations can also be seen as alternative ways of Jesus fulfilling his ministry: make bread for the people, take power, astonish people with miraculous acts … anything but crucifixion and resurrection.” This sounds pretty attractive! . . . but Jesus didn’t take the easy route…the one where he could have exploited his charisma, his popularity, and supernatural attributes. Rather he chose true discipleship … loving the unlovable, seeking justice through peaceful means, and challenging the religious establishment of his day. Rather than the majestic rule expected of a Messiah, he personified humility.

For some reason, the term wilderness can connote for us a very negative place … it sounds scary; a place of isolation and abandonment; a place where one can feel completely lost. Yet, the wilderness is a necessary place, a place of opportunity wherein we can really face ourselves with our human frailties, but also discover our human potential for authentic living.

In this Lenten season let us hear and respond to the call of the wilderness. It can be an essential *time out* for us to face a moment of reality that we may have been avoiding. To get in touch with ourselves is the key to understanding our relationships with others and, more importantly, whatever all that God is to us.

The Lenten season is a time of focused contemplation and reflection in light of our faith. Lent is not so much a time to give up something. Rather it is a time to discern what it is that we need to take up. Let us use this Lenten time wisely and with intention. Let us not fear the wilderness but embrace it with all its possibilities for discovery as disciples of Jesus and together as a family of faith, remembering that we are the body of Christ. Amen