

"SANDSTORM IN THE WILDERNESS"
(Sermon by Rev. Don Parsons)

Scripture Lesson:- Luke 4: 1 - 15

"What do you think Jesus gave up for Lent?" she asked innocently.

It is the kind of question that catches you off guard, isn't it, even if it comes from one of the bright members of your Confirmation Class. For one thing, there was no such thing as Lent back in the time of Jesus.

Oh there is some evidence that early Christians fasted forty hours between Good Friday and Easter, but the custom of spending forty days in prayer and self-denial did not come into the Christian experience until much later in our history.

But this morning we do find Jesus sitting in the wilderness, being tempted by what the Gospel of Luke calls "the devil". His hair is still wet from his baptism by his cousin John in the Jordan River.

There is still ringing in his ears the voice of God:- "This is my Son, my Beloved, with whom I am well pleased." But there has been no opportunity to gather with his family and friends for the usual post-baptism celebration.

Instead it is out to the desert where according to Luke he endures a forty-day examination.

Actually, the exam came at *the end* of those forty days when the wilderness had had a chance to wear Jesus down. The examiner knew better than to start when Jesus was fresh and well fed, still pumped from his Baptism, and passionate in his prayers.

No, the tempter would wait for "the opportune time".

Have you had any personal experience in a desert? I have been in a desert only briefly - and that was only a few miles from the glitz and glammer of Las Vegas - a wilderness in its own right, but of another kind I suppose.

// At a preaching workshop a few years ago, I heard Barbara Brown Taylor describe how she once sat in the desert all by herself, just to see what it was like. "It was hard. It was awful," she told us.

"The first thing I noticed was how quiet it was - so quiet that I could hear the racket my body makes - gurgle, wheeze, thump.

The second thing I noticed was how fast I got lonely. The desert is so big, so empty that you cannot help noticing how small and perishable you are. It can suck the self-confidence right out of you...

The third thing I noticed was the flies. Nothing can try your spirit like a fly.

There I was in the desert, trying to commune with God, and all I could think about was that devilish fly buzzing in my ears, dive-bombing my head, distracting me from prayer."

(Also found in *Bread of Angels*, p. 37) //

Well I suspect that not many of us from the comfortable GTA have ever tried to use the desert as a spiritual place. And yet three of the four gospel writers tell us that for Jesus the wilderness was the setting for his spiritual formation.

We know that over those forty days and nights there seemed to be no sign of God at all.

The sky that had opened over him when he came dripping out of the Jordan at his baptism,

now remained shut. There were no doves...

There was no voice booming a divine blessing...

There was just Jesus, and the desert – and eventually when he seemed ripe for the testing, the teasing of the tempter.

We don't think a lot about "temptation" do we? And if we do, it is kind of frivolous.

// I will confess that this weekend I have given in to the temptation to sit in front of the Olympics – putting off writing a sermon on "temptation".

Most of the temptations we face do not have life-changing consequences –

giving in to adolescent pressure perhaps and doing something mischievous or risqué – skinny dipping at dusk, or throwing a water balloon in the university residence, or cheating on an exam, or telling a "white lie" to get ahead.

Or what about this. We've all had this experience.

You've enjoyed a wonderful meal in a nice restaurant – taking advantage of "Winterlicious" perhaps – when the server comes by with the desert tray.

"This is German chocolate cake, we have pecan pie, we have orange spice cake drizzled in raspberry sauce, we have crème de menthe parfaits..."

"Man, get thee behind me Satan! I really don't know. They all look so good. I'm really quite full. I'm watching my waistline. But maybe just this time.

Could we have two forks for the warm chocolate fudge brownie with the ice cream swimming in chocolate sauce, garnished with whipped cream?

It's so tempting!"

Such are the silly temptations that tease us day by day... //

But wade in deeper. As we open our album this morning, we find a series of snapshots of heavy-duty temptations – Jesus hunkering down for forty days out there in that howling, bleak, desert – burning sun by day, freezing cold by night... sandstorm... and flies... wilderness...

"You are hungry, aren't you?" the tempter observes. "I can hear your tummy making some embarrassing noises. Why don't you command these stones here to become loaves of bread? You can do that. No problem."

Or this:- "You can have power and influence over all the kingdoms of the world.

You can get away with it. No one needs to know... All of this will be yours if... if..."

Then this:- "Why don't you call on God for a special favour? Go ahead. Throw yourself down from the temple. You *know* that God will take care of you. So what's the big deal?"

Every time he was offered more – more bread, more power, more protection – Jesus turned the evil one down. *No* to the bread, Jesus say, *no* to the kingdoms, *no* to the heavenly host swooping in to rescue him. His relationship with God he will not compromise.

It is God alone he will worship!

There are awful moments when we have felt life tumbling in on us like that -- sand stinging, the way ahead uncertain, God feeling very far away, weird temptations whispering around the edges of your life...

We know about wilderness because every one of us has already been there:-
 the look on the doctor's face as she shares the frightening diagnosis,
 the hour the HR people give you to clean out your desk,
 the adult child who is so depressed he can see only black,
 the worry-filled restless tossing at three in the morning when no sleep will come.
 Anytime or anywhere we feel vulnerable, or alone, or overwhelmed,
 anytime or anywhere we wonder where God is – that is for us wilderness that is just as
 devastating as any experience that happens to be forty days from nowhere.

How in the world do you cope with that? Maybe you just sit there staring into space.
 Maybe you find a way to pray... maybe you hum Taize songs... maybe you scream...
 maybe you grab some crayons and with colour and passion you fill the paper with the
 rage, or the fear, or the hurt, or the temptation within...
 Maybe you simply call on the name of God... just that...
 Maybe from somewhere within, something speaks to you in the midst of the sandstorm...
 some word you did not realize was there...
 "Yea though I walk through the valley of the shadow... thou art with me..."
 "In life, in death, in life beyond death, God is with us. We are not alone."

// Fred Craddock, regarded by many as the dean of North American preachers today, helps us
 understand the gift of that.

He points out that a wise homemaker when berries are ripe, and vegetables are fresh in the garden, will
 can, and freeze, and put away in the cellar jars of fruit, relish, pickles, vegetables, so that when
 the winds of January howl and the ground is frozen and hard, she may feed her family as
 though it were August.

Just so, the wise person of faith will put away in the cellar of the mind and heart the gift of worship –
 some word of scripture, some melody of hymn, some insight of sermon, some hug of friend,
 some word of encouragement, some gift of love,
 so that when the job is terminated, when the diagnosis is frightening, when the relationship
 unravels, when the world tumbles in on top of you, when it feels like wilderness,
 you will be able to draw spiritual nourishment from the cellar of your soul,
 and you will survive when others cannot, cannot, cannot cope at all. //

I hope you noticed that Jesus survives those weeks in the wasteland by doing just that -- drawing on the
 resources of his faith. He remembers and quotes scripture verses he had been taught in
 synagogue, completely immobilizing the power of the evil one over him.

And when the time of testing was over, he strode out of that wilderness to take on
 what he knew God was calling him to do. Amen