



Grace Lutheran Church, State College, PA

Rev. Carolyn K. Hetrick

1st Sunday of Lent: March 10, 2019

Sermon Title: "Spirit in the Wilderness"

Gospel Text: Luke 4:1-13

Jesus has been fasting and tempted in the wilderness for 40 days. One temptation is to reduce this gospel and Lent to some quick and easy thing we can try on for 40 days. Like some kind of "cleansing" that will make us feel better. As a child in Catholic school, this gospel is part of why we were told you had to give up something for Lent which I never really understood. It felt like "if I can give up chocolate for 40 days I show Jesus that I love him." After all, Jesus starved for 40 days-you can do a little thing." As I got older, I thought that maybe it was just a nice way to "take a break" and end up with a better "me." Then I discovered that many people don't even get what fasting from something is about, much less what Lent is about and that no matter how hard I tried to explain, it always came out sounding like Lent was about me and my self-selected "sacrifice" and not about Jesus.

Suzanne Guthrie is an Episcopal priest who lived for a time on a farm called The Community of the Holy Spirit. She says, "I can't count how many people have said to me over the years, 'I just LOVE Lent!' But Lent, (on the farm) is when you're running out of the winter stores and the greens have not yet sprouted in the earth and you're half starved. It's a fast imposed by the land and climate made holy by practice... We grew and preserved most of our food. Every spring, all of us at the farm wondered aloud what our own lives would be like if we didn't use freezers ... Trying to live close to the land and reflecting on food this way opens to us the fragility of life and the abundance we take for granted." We here in State College can just go to Wegmans and pick up all sorts of wonderful foods at any time of year if we wanted to. Guthrie notes that on the farm she rarely went to the store. "There was lots of frozen kale in that freezer – which is just as awful as you are imagining it right now." But, she notes, it reminded her of the larger majority of people in the world for whom an American grocery store is like a decadent dream. Fasting not only takes fortitude, Guthrie says it "widens the boundaries of compassion and stretched her heart."

That is what these weeks are about. Along with prayer and giving, fasting is one of the disciplines of Lent. This time is intended to stretch us and help draw our hearts us closer to Jesus- to understand the heart and purpose of God and the work of the cross. That place inside us that flourishes when we are open to tending our inner growth, which is more intense than a simple "outer" renovation.

Our hearts are what God is after.

In Lent, I confess that I am always struck by Jesus' heart- in the face of so many things that would tempt him otherwise and knowing full well all of the ways that his followers will fail to follow in their hearts. Who or what gives him the power for all of this?

The Spirit in the wilderness.

Let's walk backwards for a minute to Jesus' baptism in the wilderness. Jesus comes up out of the water and Luke tells us that while he is praying, the Holy Spirit descends on him like a dove. As that Spirit is moving, a voice claims Jesus as "Beloved Son."

But then a strange thing happens: Jesus, full of that 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. I don't about you, but I'm pretty sure forty days without food while arguing with the devil would not be next for me.

The same Holy Spirit is moving in both these moments. And after this, the Spirit that alights on Jesus to animate his synagogue preaching from the scroll of Isaiah, of being anointed to bring good news to the poor, setting captives free and proclaiming favor in place of all our wildernesses. Jesus' being attuned to this same, purposeful Holy Spirit drives it all.

Most of us associate the Holy Spirit with happy times, like baptisms, not temptation. With Pentecost and not Lent. And yet, it is the Holy Spirit that drives the story in Jesus' hometown sermon-gone-awry in Nazareth where Jesus chooses not to return the anger of the crowds. In Luke, what is at stake is not so much personal temptations around faith, but about Jesus' unique vocation: as Spirit-anointed Son of God in the wilderness of humanity.

We often see in our translations that the devil is suggesting temptations IF Jesus is the Son of God. But in the original Greek, sometimes "if" means "if," like I wonder if it will rain today. But other times it means "since." "Since you are the Son of God..." The devil knows, that's why the Spirit moves.

Grounded in the Holy Spirit in baptism, anointed by that Spirit to preach good news for the poor, and prepared by the Spirit to walk through the wilderness of rejection with grace- this is how Jesus lives- by what the Spirit in the wilderness brings. The temptations were intended by the devil to induce Jesus to turn his heart and life into an expression of power, to dominate, to be "extraordinary." Instead we will see Jesus embody the opposite. Jesus will hold out to the end, enduring whatever was to befall him, not imposing himself upon anyone, living cheerfully and peacefully among simple people, and not forcing God's hand even in his most extreme need. It's by the power of the Holy Spirit, Jesus the Christ rejected temptations.

And in so doing, Ladislaus Boros writes, Jesus “won back the essence of humanity. He let the powers of evil come right up to him. And at the decisive moment he shattered them with a simple No. He did not betray us for a crust of bread... His victory was not a dazzling triumph, since no one knew of it. It took place in utter solitude. Nevertheless, it made possible a new future for mankind—the turning of hearts to goodness, not of stones to bread.”

(Ladislaus Boros In Time of Temptation translated by Simon and Erika Young)

Like Jesus, we often wrestle with living as spirit anointed children of God. But there is not question about “if” we are such. We are filled with the same Spirit. As individuals, as a congregation, and as the larger community, we can be tempted to seek out ways to follow Jesus that make us look good, or that will give us more influence and popularity; that will make us more attractive and make people want to become a part of us. We can be induced to turn our heart and life into an expression of power, to dominate, to be “extraordinary.” Or to struggle with forgiveness and grace. The season of Lent is an opportunity for us to examine ourselves and our temptations, to be stretched and to be reminded—we too are filled with the Spirit. As followers of Jesus who embodies the opposite.

But SINCE we are filled with the Holy Spirit, in our baptism, Jesus’ vocation as Spirit-anointed is ours as well.

We too are driven to be a community of the Holy Spirit in the wilderness places in the world, centered in Christ’s cross of grace and love.

May the Spirit in the wilderness continue to move in us

and guide us to embrace the life Jesus embodies,

to expand our capacity to love,

and yes, even to drive us to places we cannot imagine, but places where God most desires us to be.