

Lent 1 C
Deuteronomy 26:1-11

Feb 21, 2010
Psalm 91:1-2,9-16

St. Andrew's Church
Romans 10:8b-13

The Rev. Susan Russell
Luke 4:1-13

We have all spent time in the wilderness. I mean we have all been plucked up out of the routine of our lives and put down in an unfamiliar place, a disconcerting place, a place we don't recognize that seems out of focus.

I'm not saying God does that to us. Life does it. But the Holy Spirit is always somewhere in it.

We may find ourselves in the wilderness because of sudden illness. Hospitals are places of wilderness because they are disorienting. Nothing's familiar, not the sights, nor the people, nor the smells, nor the sounds. The lights are on all night and everything beeps. We wait there to heal, not knowing how long it will take, like wandering in the wilderness.

Or we suffer a loss. Someone dear to us, our home, our livelihood, a piece of our memory, a beloved pet, a precious object. Life is interrupted while loss becomes the center of our attention and grief disorients us. For a period of time we're in the wilderness.

Any change in our lives, even a positive one, no matter how much we have looked forward to it – moving to a new place, changing careers, starting a new relationship, having a baby – any change can lead to a period of time in the desert.

It's not a bad thing. It will probably be uncomfortable and it will feel as though you are wandering without aim for a while. In the wilderness one cannot see what lies in the future. But there can be great growth in a period of time like this.

I can say to you that my first year with you has, at times, had the feel of a wilderness experience. I moved from a place where I was known and loved. Much here has been unfamiliar. It has not always been comfortable. In virtually everything there has been change. But I can say with complete honesty that this time has been full of growth for me.

In Lent we are called to place ourselves intentionally in the wilderness in order that we might experience the kind of growth that is possible in unfamiliar territory. The Lenten disciplines that we take on are meant to shake us out of our routine, to leave us feeling uncomfortable in some way so that we notice things about our lives that we do perhaps without thinking, things that we might want to change if we took a good look at them.

It's easy to go wrong on Lenten disciplines, though. They mustn't become a source of pride, like when we succeed in depriving ourselves of chocolate or cigars or magazines or going to the movies or whatever for the whole 40 days (with time off on Sundays, of course). That's a case of a good intention gone badly wrong.

Lent is not an opportunity to test our will power. It's not a time to punish ourselves, either. Lent is not a time to grovel and to get ourselves lost in the sins we have committed. That's not what the wilderness is all about.

And most of all, Lent is not a time of isolation. Oh, you say, but Jesus was alone in the wilderness. I would argue that there were angels aplenty there with Jesus.

But remember that Jesus' time in the desert is a reflection of the time the people of Israel spent wandering in the wilderness after they were delivered out of Egypt. Most likely the 40 days Jesus spent out there having a growing and refining experience, was because the Israelites spent forty years doing it. Jesus' story comes out of theirs, and they were not alone. Oh, no. Never alone.

They were together out there, living in an uncomfortable, disorienting place together, for a long enough time that an entire generation of them died off before they were able to enter the promised land.

Just think how well they must have gotten to know each other! For better or for worse. These people with the same history, all from the same life of labor and oppression under the rule of the Pharaoh, all who claimed the same God, all who followed the lead of a man called Moses. What do you suppose their life was like in the wilderness? There's so much about it that we don't know.

All that we do know, really, is that they complained a fair amount. I'm sure it wasn't a comfortable experience. They had not yet arrived where they were going and did not know when they would get there.

There was no food. God gave them food. Then it wasn't interesting food. Then there was no water. God gave them water. They reminisced about how great life was in captivity!

Think how they must have bonded together in all their trouble. How close some of them must have become through sharing among themselves. Don't you imagine they organized games to pass the time, and told stories and found ways to make music and shared all that they knew with each other and with their children?

The food that God gave them to eat was manna. Every morning manna would appear, like dew on the grass. Just for that day. The next day there would be more manna. Manna marked their time in the wilderness. It was the sign that God provided for them every day. It wasn't the most interesting food, but it sustained them. God provided.

My friend Anne found herself in the wilderness for a period of time. Her husband, very dear to all of us, had suffered from memory loss in his later years but still had the same sweet disposition. After a fall and a head injury, though, he lost considerable ground. Anne found herself keeping vigil with him in a nursing home, a place she never planned to be.

She sat with him every day, reading to him, praying with him, listening to his favorite music, monitoring visits from their many friends.

It was a wilderness time for Anne, who found herself in a totally new place, sorrowful at the prospect of losing him, not able for the first time to talk it over with him, not able to focus on anything in the future, aware only of each day.

But she told me that a friend had helped her to see that there was manna every day. And once she had begun to see it as manna, as God providing for her, there was great comfort in it. The manna might be a phone call from a friend or a card or a meal brought to her. One day it was a photo that brought back wonderful memories. Another day it was a story she hadn't heard before, from someone who loved her husband. Every day there was manna, once she started to look for it.

I believe Lent is a good time to look for the manna that God provides us every day. We find it most often in community, provided to us by another. And of course we provide it to each other.

The Israelites did make it to the promised land. And when they were settled they remembered that it was God who had provided for them in the wilderness and they brought forth the first fruits of their labors and presented them to God.

This, we hope, is the result of a good Lent, that we have been able to see the good things God provides for us, the good things we realize living together in community, especially in the community that bears his name.

We recognize the manna we have been given, and out of gratitude we offer the very best of ourselves – to God and to each other.

Thanks be to God.

Soli Deo Gloria