

A Sermon for the First Sunday in Lent – February 22, 2015

Church of the Epiphany, Richmond Virginia

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In the Name of God who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen

“In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, ‘You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.’ And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness.” *Mark 1:9-12*

Immediately after Jesus received God’s blessing of baptismal water, God sends Jesus into the wilderness. From God’s words of blessing in which he said, “This is my beloved Son with whom I am well pleased,” God sends Jesus to a place where it would be painful for Jesus to be. It was a desert that by day was too hot and by night was too cold. There was very little water, no food. It was a very lonely place. For forty days and forty nights, Jesus was left to be alone with the tempter. Jesus had to experience that wilderness alone. You and I each have received God’s blessing in the waters of baptism. And you and I too have from time to time found ourselves in the wilderness.

I shall never forget an image that Thomas Troeger, a theologian and seminary professor, painted for us all when he spoke at our son David’s graduation from Dickinson College in June of 1993. Dr. Troeger spoke of “landscapes of the heart.” He spoke of those landscapes that form in our hearts that shape our perspective and help to determine how we face life and the multitude of challenges we face. He spoke with no notes or manuscript and his address was not recorded, but the power of that image has remained with me ever since. This past week, I googled his name and found this quote of his that I believe speaks to us as we begin this Lenten season. Dr. Troeger says; “I am trying to map the landscape of the heart that still rejoices in God, yet lives in a world that is often oblivious to the spirit. I believe to live gracefully with this tension is the mark of wisdom.” As I think about what Dr. Troeger says, I think of the wildernesses that I have experienced and of the wildernesses that others have experienced. These are wildernesses that have formed the landscapes of our hearts.

You and I cannot escape those times when we experience wilderness. Those times of wilderness come to all of us as certainly as life and breath. As individuals, we have all known wilderness places in our journey. Families experience times of wilderness. Nations and peoples certainly have known times of wilderness. Churches have known times of wilderness as well. Wilderness takes its form in many ways. Our times of wilderness can be uncomfortable places of hunger, thirst and longing. They can be times of loneliness and pain after a loss. Our wildernesses can be places of testing and temptation including the temptation to lose hope. Some 18 years ago at just about this time of year, shortly after we had lost our son, Jamie, I was sitting in my office staring against a blank screen on my computer. I was in a wilderness the likes of which I had never known. I heard the footsteps of my colleague, Thom Blair, coming down the hall. "Thom," I called out, "Come in here." He came in and put his hand on my shoulder. "Thom," I said, "When someone we love dies, is that all there is? Jamie is so gone. I can't hear his voice. I can't even remember what he looks like. You and I have preached the Resurrection. We have been with families and have tried to reassure them that their loved ones were with God. But now it just seems to me like lights out. It's over. Is this all there is?" His response was vintage Thom Blair. "David, I'm tellin' you what's the truth, man. If this is all there is, we are toast." Knowing Thom as I did, I suddenly felt that I had a thread onto which I could hold. It was a thread that would sustain me through that wilderness. God's spirit was palpable in Thom's presence at my side and in his simple yet profound words.

Today, as we begin our Lenten journey, we remember that Jesus has been there for us. He has known what we have gone through or are perhaps going through now. As Jesus was facing his wilderness there was his baptismal promise, a thread onto which he was able to hold. It was the voice of the Spirit of God, a voice that reassured him that he was God's beloved son. Jesus was able to meet his wilderness in the desert tempted by the devil ultimately because he knew he was a child of God. Through his baptism, he knew that as a child of God, God would give him the strength to persevere. It is an important thing for us to remember who Jesus was—that he was himself a child of God—and that a child of God, God would not leave him in his wilderness experience. As we remember who Jesus was, so we remember who we are, that is, that you and I, through our baptism, are sons and daughters ourselves of God. God will not abandon us in our times of wilderness. On Ash Wednesday, the Church throughout the world, with ashes on our brows, began our forty days of following Jesus through his

time in the wilderness. We will reflect upon what he has done for us through his suffering and death. We will remember how he resisted the tempter. We will remember how he faced loneliness, hunger, even fear. This is a season for you and me and for all baptized people to hold fast onto those things that make it possible for us to persevere in the midst of our own times of wilderness. If you, are experiencing in some way your own wilderness, how might you still be able to hold on to some thread of hope that will make it possible to rejoice in God's presence?

You and I are God's beloved. This Lent becomes a time when you and I take these forty days to think about what Jesus has done for us as he went through his time of wilderness for us. Where might God be finding you in the wilderness you may be experiencing? And where might God meet you in the landscape of your heart so that you might still rejoice in God? In your wilderness, wherever and whatever that may be for you now, may God find you and may you live gracefully in that wilderness. Remember, you are a child of God. You were created in God's image. As the spirit of God brought Jesus through his wilderness in the desert, so God will bring you through whatever wilderness you may be experiencing now or may experience in the time to come. May you know that you belong to God who will never abandon you. May this Lent be a time during which you can rejoice in God even if you are living in a period of your life when you wonder if the spirit of God is really even present. You have been created in the image of God, and God will not leave you comfortless, but will bring you through your wilderness. *Amen.*