

The Rev. Christine Love Mendoza
The Church of the Good Shepherd
First Sunday in Lent, March 1, 2020
Matthew 4:1-11

Good morning....and welcome to the desert. In case you missed the big hints – the exposed and bare altar, the penitence of the Great Litany, and all the purple – we are now in the season of Lent. This is the time in which we accompany Jesus in his desert fasting and temptations. We will spend the next 40 days wandering this place of fierce landscapes. The desert is where distractions are stripped away; where everything is reduced to its essentials; where ultimately, we are left with only ourselves and God.

The desert is where we begin to see clearly again. The season of Lent provides us an opportunity for a course correction – in which we may remember who we are and who God is. Most importantly, in our current age of convenience and relative plenty, the desert of Lent breaks down our illusions and we see through a different lens – a lens in which it is abundantly clear that God is God, and we are not.

Now, I know that sounds obvious – that God is God and we are not. And, of course this is true, and on any given day, if asked, we will readily affirm so. And yet, if we are courageous enough to be honest with ourselves, we will realize that for much of the time we operate under the delusion that we are God, that we have far more control over our lives and that around us. And it is so easy to do, isn't it, especially during the good times of comfort and success? When things are going poorly, we readily recognize that we are not in full control and that we need God. But when things are good? Then we like to think that all of that is our own doing.

But here in the Lenten desert, we can no longer live as if we are the center of existence. Here, we are freed of the distractions that come with plenty and convenience. Indeed, this is the purpose of the discipline of giving something up for Lent. It is in the felt experience of absence – of loss or denial of satisfaction – that brings us to the present moment and gives us the opportunity to turn our attention away from self and toward God. This self-denial in and of itself is not the primary purpose of Lent, rather it is an instrument of repentance – a signpost pointing us in a different direction to seek our fullness and joy. The good we seek in the season of Lent is a clearer understanding of who we are and who God is.

We must beware, however, because dangers also live in the desert. It is here that we, like Jesus, are tempted. Stripped of all non-essentials, the barren landscapes of the desert bring the temptations and the desires of our hearts, minds, and bodies into sharp relief. The desert can bring a disconcerting clarity of vision to that which we prefer not to see within ourselves. But the truth of this vision can also allow for the grace of God's love and forgiveness to bring healing and wholeness.

Following Jesus' baptism by John, the evangelist Matthew tells us that Jesus is led into the wilderness by the Holy Spirit to be tempted by the devil. After Jesus fasts for 40 days, the devil comes and tests him with three temptations. First, knowing that Jesus is famished, the devil says, if you are the Son of God then you can turn these stones into loaves of bread. But Jesus declines, by saying that one's true nourishment is found in the word of God. The devil then takes him to Jerusalem and to the highest part of the Temple and says, if you are the Son of God then prove it. Leap off this pinnacle so that God will have to send the angels to lift you up. Jesus again declines and responds that one shouldn't put God to the test. Finally, the devil takes him to the top of a very high mountain and shows him all the kingdoms of the world, and offers to give Jesus all this power and splendor if only he would worship him. At this, Jesus fiercely rebukes the devil and says he will only worship the Lord our God. With that, the devil leaves and angels come to attend to him.

When we remember that this story immediately follows Jesus' baptism at which he was claimed by God as his son, we realize that the question the devil is presenting is not whether Jesus

is the Son of God, rather what does it mean for Jesus to be the Son of God. Three times, the devil tries to redirect Jesus' focus upon himself. And three times Jesus essentially says, "No, not me.... God. Look to where I point, not to the one pointing. What I do and who I am is a revelation not so much of myself, rather a revelation of who God is and how God loves."

There are many interpretations of these three temptations by the devil but there is some general consensus that they represent the very earthly and human desires that lead us to stray from our faith and fidelity to God. The first is a temptation of hedonism – of physical hunger and satisfaction. The second is a temptation of egoism – the devil essentially tempts Jesus to show off in front of the crowds at the Temple and reveal his Son-ship with God by leaping off the pinnacle and being saved by heavenly angels. The third temptation is one of power and materialism – the devil offers Jesus all the power and riches of the world if only he turns his back on God and worships him instead. At each of these temptations, Jesus responds with full obedience and fidelity to God, saying that only in God does one find true and everlasting sustenance, identity, and authority.

These certainly seem like perfect temptations for the Son of God...and Jesus gives perfect responses as the Son of God. I like to imagine, however, that our Gospel account might have left out a bit of the drama and internal conflict. Yes, I believe, as the Church asserts, Jesus to be fully divine and the Son of God. And at the same time, I believe as the Church also asserts, Jesus to be fully human. Our Gospels attest to this humanity. We read about Jesus' grief-stricken tears outside the tomb where his friend Lazarus was laid. We read about his agonized praying in the garden of Gethsemane before his passion, when Jesus pleads for another way out of this coming horror, even while pledging his faithful obedience for whichever cup that God would give him. We read about his very human range of emotions – of anger, love, fear, compassion, and mercy.

Given this, I like to imagine that Jesus may have paused for just a moment before he responded to the devil. That he, like us, might have indulged in pondering what could be, and found some part of himself truly tempted. In fact, I realize that I am comforted by a Jesus who was not merely offered something wonderful but was actually tempted by it, if even just a tiny bit. This becomes a Jesus who understands the human condition and our weaknesses and loves us anyway, even while continually calling us to our better selves. Forgiveness from one like this is real mercy. This is a Lord I want to follow, even if the path leads to the cross.

So, here we are in the desert of Lent. The wandering journey in this fierce landscape is not a comfortable one. It is not pleasant to see ourselves so clearly. It is not fun to have our distractions taken away and to recognize so plainly our sin, weakness, and mortality. And yet, there are blessings to be found here as well. With this clarity of vision, comes a renewed understanding of God and his presence in the world. In the desert, we learn not only the truth of our human condition, but also the truth of God's unfailing love and mercy towards us.

While we do this difficult labor of opening our eyes and seeing into the dark and dusty corners of our hearts, we should do so in light of the whole story; knowing that this journey doesn't end in the desert, rather it begins there.

Frederick Buechner describes our Lenten work in this way, "After being baptized by John in the river Jordan, Jesus went off alone into the wilderness, where he spent forty days asking himself the question what it meant to be Jesus. During Lent, Christians are supposed to ask one way or another what it means to be themselves... To hear yourself try to answer [this question] is to begin to hear something not only of who you are, but of both what you are becoming and what you are failing to become. It can be a pretty depressing business all in all, but if sackcloth and ashes are at the start of it, something like Easter may be at the end."¹

And I say, Amen to that!

¹ Buechner, Frederick; *Whistling in the Dark: A Doubter's Dictionary*. (HarperCollins Publishers; 1993) p.82.