

It is time to 'Press pause'. Through our prayerful, intentional engagement in Lent, new life can spring up in us, in our faith communities and the communities we serve. To celebrate Easter Day, as God's Easter people, without the preparation of Lent and the painful journey through Holy Week, would be denying, in a sense, our engagement in the story of our faith, and our part in that story. We need our own wilderness time to explore our role and our story as God's people. Who and what tempts us to be self-serving, power-seeking, ego-driven? How can we let go and trust?

There had to be a wilderness journey with God, before the ancient Hebrew people could arrive in Canaan from Egypt (from slavery to freedom). There had to be a Spirit-led time of wilderness temptation, before Jesus could begin his three-year ministry leading to the cross and the empty tomb.

I wonder... whether Jesus' first wilderness experience – an experience he was to suffer again in Gethsemane and on the cross at Golgotha – encouraged him to choose his community of twelve disciples, and accept the support of women friends & followers?

Thinking on Jesus' experience, who and what might help you survive and grow through the wilderness times in your life? And how might you help others through their wilderness times?

God of the wilderness

You lead us ever deeper

into ourselves,

to the barren, tortured desert land

of the heart

where temptation invites and shapes us.

Grant us the courage, O God,

to enter the discovery space

of our true self -

and there, find you.

In the name of Jesus the Christ. Amen.

Lent I 10th March 2019

Readings: Deut.26:1-11; Ps.91; Rom.10:8b-13; Luke 4:1-13

Reflection:

I speak in the name of God, 'My refuge and my fortress; my God, in whom I trust.'
Ps.91:2

'My refuge and my fortress; my God, in whom I trust.' But do I? Really? Trust God? Have I been tested? If so, how did I respond? Interesting questions!

*Perhaps you know the game of trust whereby a volunteer stands very stiff, with hands crossing their chest, and falls - both backwards and forwards - relying on others to catch them? I remember it well from school camps (AND, would you believe, discernment for ordination training!) Each time the volunteer falls, the person catching them leaves it a little later, so that they fall further, before feeling the safety of strong arms beneath them.

**So do I trust that God will catch me when I fall?And do you?

The temptation and testing of Jesus at the beginning of his ministry – a ministry that will take him beyond the limits of human endurance – offers us a glimpse of what it means to be 'led by the Spirit' and to survive 'in the wilderness.' What it means to face our human fallibilities and weaknesses - to face temptation - and yet to trust.

As we begin the season of Lent, we observe the forty days that Jesus wandered in the wilderness filled with trial and temptation. The three specific temptations we read of in the gospel (we could identify them as wealth, power and fame), link Jesus firstly, with Moses and the Hebrew people, fed with the bread of heaven – the manna in the wilderness.

Jesus is unsuccessfully tempted with the opportunity to prove himself by turning stone to bread, to be totally self-reliant in his hunger. Next he is tempted with the offer of political power and dominion in exchange for his soul – an invitation to buy-in to the apparent happy, attractiveness - yet in truth, sad aloneness of 'me' and sell out on a life of mutuality, justice and community.

One theologian invites our imagination to the scene:

*'So here's the deal and this is what you get:
The penthouse suite with world-commanding views,
The banker's bonus and the private jet,
Control and ownership of all the news,
An "in" to that exclusive one percent
Who know the score, who really run the show,
With interest on every penny lent,
And sweeteners for cronies in the know.
A straight arrangement between me and you,
No hell below or heaven high above,
You just admit it, and give me my due
And wake up from this foolish dream of love...'
But Jesus laughed, 'You are not what you seem.
Love is the waking life, you are the dream.'*

Finally, Jesus is invited to throw himself from the pinnacle of the temple – tempted to test God rather than trust God; to gain personal glory rather than glorify God.

All three temptations have an underlying theme of relying on self alone rather than trust and reliance on God. All three temptations prompt Jesus to reach into his faith story and his lived experience and knowledge - his life story - as he calls forth the words of familiar scripture and claims more strongly who he is and what is important to him. Perhaps this is why we read that the Spirit led Jesus in the wilderness.

I've heard it said that we Christians spend our lives between the words of Jesus that ask God: 'Why have you forsaken me?' and the others that proclaim: 'Into your hands I commend my spirit.'

Our own personal sojourns often locate us in the wilderness; winding within uncomfortable and uncertain terrain filled with temptations and trials and a sense of alone-ness. It helps to be reminded of the psalmists words in Psalm 139:

Where can I go from your Spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence? If I ascend to heaven you are there; if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there. If I take the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea, even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me fast. If I say, 'surely the darkness shall cover me, and the light around me become night, even the darkness is not dark to you; the night is as bright as the day, for darkness is as light to you.'

As Jesus prepared his closest friends before his journey to the cross and the tomb, he said, '*On that day you will realize that I am in my Father, and you are in me, and I am in you.*' John 14:20. Fourteen centuries later, the mystic, Julian of Norwich said: '*And all shall be well*'

'On that day you will realize that I am in my Father, and you are in me, and I am in you.' '*And.... all shall be well*'

That is Easter, that is the journey of Lent. In the journey of Lent, for 46 days, we move beyond the shadow of our egos so the light of Christ that opened a tomb, can open our eyes to the astonishing realization that we are in him and thus in God and each other, and 'all is well.'

Lent offers us the opportunity to tear away all that would blind us, or numb us to that reality. For some, that may come through fasting from mindless consumption of whatever distracts us; for others it may come through service to our neighbor; but what is most important about Lent is that we make time and space for an awareness that God is with us and loves us – right here and now.

As Southern Hemisphere people, we notice during Lent, that Creation all around us is beginning to die. Nature seems to echo the ancient words addressed to those receiving the imposition of ashes on Ash Wednesday: "Remember you are dust, and to dust you shall return."

Just as nature pares down to her essentials in autumn, we, the church, also pare down in Lent. Lent focuses on the essentials: new life in the death and resurrection of Jesus and our participation in this through our faith and baptism.