



The Lenten Wilderness, The Crucible of Change

*Homily by Lisa Wiens Heinsohn given for the people of St. John's Episcopal Church
The First Sunday in Lent, February 21, 2021: Mark 1:9-15*

Today as I begin this homily, I'd like to invite you for a moment to become truly present. Whatever you are doing—whether you are sitting in your living room watching this with your family, or listening to this in podcast form while you are out walking your dog or driving somewhere, or reading this on the web, please do take a moment to stop, pause this video, if you are driving and you can spare just two extra minutes, find a place to pull over, and close your eyes, and breathe. During this silence, please just watch your breath, watch your thoughts without engaging them, and become aware of the fulness of this moment within and around you, without any judgment at all.

Now if you'd be willing, please bear with me, and try this again. Please breathe deeply in silence for just a few seconds more. This time, please see if you can become aware that everything around you and within you, the ocean you are swimming in, is what Cynthia Bourgeault calls "The Mercy", what mystics call the Love of God, what Jesus calls the Kingdom of God which is very near to you, closer than your own breath. Simply breathe that in for a moment or two.

If you can, stay grounded in the Mercy, in the Love of God, in the Being of God who is closer than your own name, and please try to listen from that place, as I will try to do the same and speak from that place.

Today is the first Sunday in lent. Lent is the season of the church that happens every year in spring, for the forty days leading up to Easter. It is traditionally understood to be a time of fasting and prayer and penitence, in which we seek to become aware of our need for change within and without, and in which we seek to become open to the power and presence of God. Traditionally we talk about “giving something up” for lent, and certainly you can do that if it helps you. But I do not believe that thinking about what you want to give up is the right place to begin. Rather, we begin by remembering what Jesus did, in the story we always hear the first Sunday in lent, which is that Jesus was driven by the Spirit to the wilderness, where he prayed and fasted for forty days in the desert. While he was there he was tempted by Satan, whose name means the Accuser. This year, rather than focusing on the content of those temptations, which Mark’s gospel does not, let’s focus on the fact of being in the wilderness and the fact of prayer.

In Hebrew the word for wilderness is *midbar*, מִדְבָּר, which comes from a root word meaning “to speak.” The wilderness is always the place where we go to hear the voice of God. To begin lent, rather than thinking it through or talking it through, we begin by listening. We begin by doing what we just did a minute ago, to listen to our breath, and then to recognize the presence of God, the utter power of what we call Love. The wilderness is the place that is away from our usual habits and activities and structure. It is the place close to the natural world which is saturated by the presence of God. It is not a safe place; it is not a place filled with creature comforts. But it is a place where we can confront our limitations, where we can be de-centered, and where we can encounter God.

When I was in college I was lucky enough to go to the Middle East to study the Arab-Israeli conflict. We spent time in Jordan and in Israel / Palestine. In Jordan we went to visit the ancient city of Petra in the desert, and I remember having the chance to go walk alone to the top of one of the hills around, in the vast heat and silence of the desert. It truly did feel like *midbar*, the place where God speaks. But I have also felt the same looking at Gitchi Gummi, the vast inland sea that is Lake Superior, or walking the Superior Hiking Trail, or driving Highway 1 on the coast of California between the mountains and the ocean. As much as most human beings instinctively feel, or intellectually believe, that there is something transcendent, a Power Greater than ourselves as 12 step programs put it, just thinking about it can't always help us access the presence of God. We need something more. We need silence, and prayer. And there are also seasons when we need the wilderness. We need a more complete break with business as usual. A more complete separation from the unconscious habits of thinking, speaking, and acting we live in, and separation from the structures of our common life that we become so accustomed to we no longer see them truly. Lent is that time of year for the people of the Church.

We do speak in lent about repentance. Within the community of St. John's, our people are all over the map theologically. Some people are classic orthodox Christians who embrace the call to repentance, accepting that all of us are in need of healing and transformation. For others the word repentance might be off-putting, seeming to be a word that shames us or that is used abusively to belittle or judge. We in the Episcopal church have re-expressed orthodox Christian faith in terms of seven practices, the first of which is "turn"—meaning to change direction, whether that's a one degree slight course correction or a full

180 turnaround, which captures the same meaning as the word repentance. But neither turning nor repentance captures the fulness of what those 40 days in the desert praying and fasting and being tempted are about. You can turn in a single moment in time. You can say you're sorry and truly experience remorse, and those moments are liminal and important. But for true transformation to take place, we need time.

In the Bible we hear often of a period of 40 days or years. It took 40 full days of torrential rain for the world to be covered by the flood in the time of Noah. The Israelites wandered in the desert for 40 years after liberation from Egypt before crossing the River Jordan to live in the land of Canaan, the Promised Land. The exhausted prophet Elijah traveled in the strength of the miraculous food from the widow of Zarephath forty days and forty nights before he arrived at Horeb, the mountain of God. The prophet Jonah announced to the people of Nineveh that they had 40 days to repent before their city would be destroyed. In each of these scenarios, a period of 40 days or years is always about the time it takes for something to end and something else to begin. It's the time it takes for the old to die and the new to be born. It takes 40 weeks for a baby to develop in a mother's womb. Forty days or weeks or years are the crucible of change.

Our culture is the culture of right now, of moving at warp speed. We may not easily accept that transformation and new life take time. But there is no way around this. The spiritual life moves at plant speed. You can stare at a plant all day and see very little change. But if you come back day after day, you will soon notice that growth has taken place. So it is with the life of God, and with the transformation that we and our culture so desperately need.

During this lent, the trial of Derek Chauvin, the police officer who slowly and absolutely uncaringly murdered George Floyd last May, will happen in our city beginning March 8. We again expect our city to be in turmoil, as we face not just this one murder but the centuries of systemic racism that remains entrenched and that brutalizes the lives of so many. I wish we could change that immediately. We at St. John's believe that to be faithful followers of Jesus in our time means to address this. And we know there are many other things that need transformation. Addicts and alcoholics often reach a point of despair about continuing behavior they can obviously see is insane, but are powerless to change. We can be impatient and hurtful to our children. We know for the survival of life as we know it on our planet, we must change our lifestyles on a radical and massive scale to slow climate change. There are many things that need changing. But we also know that we must unlearn speed, distance and innocence. We know that we cannot change most of these things quickly. In fact we cannot change many things at all without the help of God. So we need the 40 days of lent to symbolize all that which needs ending, and all that which needs to be born. To symbolize the patient humility with which we are asking for the Spirit's help to change us.

So this lent, whatever other Lenten practice you engage, I'd like to invite us to do what our Bishop Craig Loya has asked of each Episcopalian in Minnesota: to spend five minutes a day praying in silence for a very specific thing: that the Holy Spirit would fill each of us and our churches with the power of loving transformation. We are invited to seek lives that are saturated by the Holy Spirit. I'd invite you to set aside the same general time everyday. Perhaps you get up in the morning, grab a cup of coffee, and go to a comfortable spot where you can be silent, seek to

consent to the presence and action of God. Or find another time of day that works best for you. Ask for the Spirit to saturate your life and the life of St. John's and Minneapolis and the Episcopal Church in Minnesota. Please do this every day. You might also seek to add five minutes at the end of your day to thank God for the day, to surrender each moment to God for God's healing, and ask for God to continue God's good work in you for the following day.

Let these moments be for us a wilderness time where we go to seek the voice of God. Let us not continue with business as usual. Let us become humble enough to accept that we need help, and then seek it and receive it from God. May we let go of that which is not working any more, and seek to receive the life God wants to birth in us. **Amen.**