

The Pivotal Decision

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Scripture: Luke 4: 3-10

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Please pray with me: Spirit of the Living God, come now and grow our faith, come and deepen our hope, come and strengthen our love, and come and water within each us the desire to be your faithful family forever. Amen.

So last week we climbed the mount of transfiguration and realized that the ascend up the mountain and the descent into the valley are part of one single story. Today's reading, there is a similar movement alive in the text. Movement from the river to the wilderness, movement from baptism to temptation, movement from the place of knowing who we are to the place of wrestling with who we are, the place of clarity to the place of questioning, the place of faith to the place of doubt.

Like the mountain and the valley, the river and the wilderness inevitably share the same landscape theologically. To have the one is to have the other. The one is necessary for the other to exist. For faith to have any meaning there has to be doubt. In fact doubt is that which propels our faith forward. Deleting doubt deletes our faith. It is important to note that both the wilderness and the river are of God, saturated with the divine.

Our journey, both individually and corporately rely on both the river and the wilderness. Remember the Hebrew of old, to reach their promised land from their land of oppression they had to travel through the sea and the wilderness. The passing through the sea was a great surprise, a miraculous gift. In the wilderness they had to ask themselves what does it mean to live as a free person. What does it mean to be God's people and not pharaoh's people. So it is the wilderness that we discover what the red sea gift actually means. It is the wilderness that we discover what our baptism really means.

Jesus, full of the Spirit, returned from the river Jordan and was led by the Spirit, not by the devil but by the Spirit. This is telling, it reminds us the reader that this endeavor is of God. The wilderness is a place where God's Spirit leads us. Therefore to resist the wilderness is to resist the spirit. We have to be led by the spirit to the wilderness because very little invites us to make that journey ourselves.

It's an exhausting journey. It's a terrifying journey. It's a journey that makes us fear we will run out of what we need for life. That we will be famished. It is only the Spirit, the spirit who names us beloved, the same Spirit that claims us, the very Spirit who cherishes our very being, only that spirit is strong enough to lead us into and through the wilderness. What is this wilderness journey? It is the journey of wrestling with who we are. Put another way, it is the decision to address the plank in our own eye as opposed to the splinter in the eyes around us. It's eye surgery -- intricate, delicate, painful.

Now we read that Jesus was tempted by the devil, now what are we to make of this? What is this devil? It's not some creature, least to my understanding, it's the human experience of wrestling with conflicts and competitive forces within us that awaken us to the deep truths of our contradictions. That we discover we are divided within ourselves, against ourselves, at odds with ourselves. My own conclusion of the creation of the devil is this experience that is so real that what people did is that they named it, they personified, something other than themselves but in actual fact it is within us.

You know this experience. In a single moment, triggered by a single event, we wrestle to love or to fear, to reveal or to hide, to share or to hoard, to accept or resist, to forgive or to fight, to trust or to be suspicious. Sometimes that exact same event will draw from us the opposite of

what just had been done. It brings us to the question: who am I? Am I generous somebody, or am I selfish?

Now this internal division or odds within ourselves has many origins. I don't understand all of it or even most of it but perhaps I understand at least this much. As a child, one of our deep desires that we carry is a longing to belong. A very profound and deep desire. To belong. So we observe. Sometimes we observe what we feel we need to do to belong. And over time belonging will come from conforming to the values, the norms, the expectations around us. Sometimes those values and norms and expectations are at odds with our true being. That our desire to belong sometimes overrides. So we go down a dangerous path of pretending in order to belong until we forget our true self. We can belong to the group without belonging to ourselves which means we don't belong to anything.

I remember a young person telling how he desired more than anything that he wanted to play the piano. But his father made a discouraging comment one day about boys that want to play the piano and so instead he played football to please his father. To have sense of belonging. All the while, the music was dancing inside his being, but never voiced.

When this happens we are formed on the outside but unravel on the inside, there may be a connection on the outside but an emptiness on the inside. Much depression, not all, but much depression is sourced at that place where our true self is denied. And nothing substitutes for our true self. Nothing. Success, achievement, praise, money, you name it. All of it, will never substitute it.

All of this to say, it is an exhausting journey to go into the wilderness. We worry we might not make it out alive. But then again, it really is a dying, when the football player dies so that the pianist can resurrect. As beautiful as that sounds, there can be an overwhelming amount of fear that when the resurrected pianist walks out the wilderness they would have lost their sense of belonging. Therefore we must be led into that wilderness by a loving and caring Spirit. So it's frightening, but resisting this journey is even more frightening.

The spirit leads Jesus to the wilderness, the wilderness is a barren place, a place of trial. It's not necessarily a physical space Jesus goes, the wilderness is any place that is a trial. As a barren place, the wilderness leads us vulnerable, exposed. In preparing for this message I did some reading on permaculture. I learned that there are 5 zones in which to plant things, and the 5th zone, the farthest and most unruly zone is called the wild area, the wilderness area. In this zone there is little to nothing that human intervention can do to help or inhibit the growth and development of the ecosystem. In other words, it is the only zone in which we are forced to watch and learn rather than control and limit. The wilderness is a place of learning. A place without distraction. Distraction that keep us from doing that eye surgery; a place of silence, of stillness, of vulnerability, of stripping bare, of pruning the vine.

Now to even find a wilderness like place in today's world is a challenge. It's because we are so overstimulated, entertained. Even this very moment, is a world filled with a voice. I was listening to a TED talk the other day, the same place we provided you clips from Bryan Stevenson a few weeks back in the Just Mercy series, except this Ted Talk was from a man named Bernie Krause. He records the sounds of nature. When he first began doing his work in 1968 he said for every 15 hours of recording, he could salvage one single hour of undisturbed nature sounds. No airplanes, no streetcars or horns, people voices. Just. nature. 15 hours to secure one hour. Today, he said it takes about 2000 hours to secure a single hour of undisturbed nature. We live in a very noisy world.

This past Wednesday Rev. Joyce led us in a beautiful Ash Wednesday service where she placed Ash's on our foreheads as a reminder that we are dust and to dust we shall return. I want you to think for a moment what the world sounded like when we were created from that

dust in Genesis 2. No trains. No airplanes, no tweets, no 24/7 news cycle. It was the sound of wind. The breath of God. The Spirit. The very spirit that leads us to the wilderness. This lent I am hoping that you will try to reclaim for yourself that time of silence to discover the question of “who am I?”

But this journey that Jesus goes on wasn't just an individual journey and that remains true for us as well. It is a corporate journey. It is a national journey as well. When I was in South Africa the people there frequently told our group that they hated being called the rainbow nation because it is lie. The country is more segregated by wealth and opportunity than during the apartheid -- it's just not legal now. But can we say our country is any better? Our mantra is “land of the free” and yet is there a contradiction there when 1/3 black men will be arrested in their lifetime and when 159,000 people are serving a life term, 50,000 of which with no chance of parole are we really free? Who am I? Who are we? Who is our true self?

In Luke's gospel this temptation narrative is following directly with Jesus' proclamation in his home town that this kingdom is nothing like the one the people had desired or expected. The status quo. This lenten season I am challenging you to join me in reflecting individually, as a church, and as a nation, have we conformed or become complacent with the status quo, and if so, how do we reconcile that with Jesus overcoming temptation and his words of a new kingdom?

You see the wilderness experience, the experience of denial, and suffering, and hunger, and fatigue, and loss reveals to us the temptations of power, opportunities, and privileges. The pain the wilderness reveals and exposes our hypocrisy of how we fail to live into our baptismal vow. So we become tempted to throw it all away. We become to tempted to say individually we are not beloved, corporately that we not an equal country. What are we to do?

Elizabeth O'Connell gives us this advice on wrestling with our identity, “a good place to start is to detect ourselves lying, lying always separates us from ourselves, but we are not all just capable of lying, we all do lie” of course, the reason that might be a startling statement is that we lie to ourselves. That is what makes lying to others so dangerous she says, we actually come to believe what we say, we start out trying to keep the truth from others and we end up keeping the truth from ourselves. The moment that happens we are fragmented, we are at odds, are true and false self are in conflict.

The Spirit wants us to wrestle that through. We pretend. We tell something in such a way to reflect ourselves in such away. We leave out facts, we overemphasize others. We make things worse than they really are. A simple gesture, a suggestive glance or look, a casual mannerism, a sigh, the tone of our voice, can deviate the truth. Based on illusions and fantasies that we have about others. Now here is the wrestling, the wilderness. The first is to acknowledge that we lie that we really do struggle with the truth. Than we must struggle with that. Question it. What were we trying to gain that we believed the truth would not have gained for us? What were we trying to hide? What image of ourselves were we trying to protect? What was it we were afraid of being found out?

Those questions are guarded by sophisticated defense mechanisms. That the moment you get anywhere close to those questions the alarms will start going off. Our lives have depended on those false alarms. The only good thing, is that the Holy Spirit is stronger than our personal defense mechanisms, the holy spirit will not rest until we break through our false self to reveal that which is true. Until we do, we will only get more and more and more lost.

This experience here, what we call church, should facilitate that terrifying journey but too often it does the complete opposite. It contributes to pretense and more pretense because apparently we should have our lives together. When what this community we call church should be is a place where we can proudly proclaim that we know we don't have our lives together and

so it gives us the freedom to explore. The truth of the contradictions. So when the spirit penetrates through those defense mechanisms we are going to reveal feelings that we didn't know we really had. Resentments that we in fact relish, fears that we cannot shake, we're going to have to wrestle with things like when we ask someone how they are it may not be that we are caring person rooted in love but rather because want to be thought of as a person that is caring which is rooted in insecurity. All our energy that we try to project that we are generous may hide the actual fact that we are terrified of losing that which we own. The moment we accept the truth of who we are, we can be free. So over the next 40 days of lent, we are going to wrestle with "who am I?" Over these few days of lent my prayer is that you will find your own wilderness amidst the noise and be led where the Spirit may take you. If there is any truth in these words may they remain with us.

Living God we like to think that we know ourselves, but it seems we are afraid to truly know who we are. Lord, if we are afraid to know who we really are than it makes it awfully difficult to know anybody else, or to even to know you. So we need help by your spirit to take us to that place of wrestling, of seeing ourselves, so help us to be open to your spirit. Penetrate the many false selves we have developed over the years. We pray as a church and as a nation O God that you will strip us bare of any pretense that we will see our division and acknowledge it, and we will commit to our healing, our unity. That our balm is based in truth and justice and not simply a smile. Lord we pray this in your name. AMEN.