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The First Sunday of Lent
St. George's Cathedral, Jerusalem

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts, be ever acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

The Spirit of God has led Jesus into the wilderness for a forty-day sojourn of soul-searching. Certainly the number forty and the location of Jesus' temptations are not lost on us. Moses and the Israelites spent forty years wandering in the wilderness, and they too were tempted. When the words "forty" and "wilderness" are around the Bible, you can count on something important going on.

Let us be clear, the wilderness for Moses and for Jesus was not some forest-filled landscape which many of us from Europe or the United States might imagine. No, the Judean wilderness just to the east of us here in Jerusalem reminds me of close up pictures of the moon more than anything else. If you have driven down to Jericho and then taken a dirt road off to the right or left you know what I mean. The wilderness is mountainous; it is dry; it is full of ravines and steep cliffs; it is very hot on summer days and cool at night; it can be pleasant on winter days like today and then very cold on winter nights; there are caves for shelter; there are very rarely any trees; wild animals are on the prowl, but they are rarely seen; it can be a lonely place.

If you find yourself out there on your own you become very aware. All your senses become very tuned in to what is going on in your little part of the world. You notice things. You see the way the shadows play on the craggy hills around and below you; you wonder how full the wadis get when it rains; the clouds in the distance play with your imagination; you notice the feel of the sand on your face as it is whipped by the wind – all of this becomes your world.

Why would the Spirit of God lead Jesus into such a place? The thing about the wilderness is that there really isn't much there and that's the point. There are very few distractions. The conditions are severe, but they are simple.

There is very little else out there but these very few distractions and God. Oh, there is one more thing. You become aware of other living creatures sharing your space in this great barren place. Besides the occasional bird; you do notice the bugs around where you sit. You can become so aware of them that you move to find another place without the bugs. Moving away from the bugs in one place, you soon discover, only allows you to be introduced to new bugs in your new location. Bugs can be a real distraction in the wilderness. But over time, these issues become small, as you get used to your little part of the planet and you have ample time to think about why you are there.

Now I cannot speak for Jesus, but my guess is that the Spirit of God led him to this place so he could focus his heart and mind and soul on God. The wilderness is just the place to go to avoid distraction, clear your head, get focused and pray. Given enough time, you begin to see how God is at work in the wilderness . . . and this is not just a play on words. There is truth in recognizing that God is always at work in the wilderness of our lives.

When we feel stressed-out; when we find ourselves pulled in too many directions; when we are lost, confused, overwhelmed – perhaps like being on our first visit to the Holy Land -- when we have lost our direction, how often we ask – where is God? . . . The truthful question really is, where are we? When we are lost in our distractions and confused by sensory overload, we need to enter the wilderness to renew our focus.

Some time of quiet to be with God – an afternoon alone walking in some tranquil place – the beach, the forest, a park, running laps around the track; a weekend retreat at a monastery; maybe the best most of us can do is a half hour without the demands of kids, family and friends. Our souls benefit from time to unwind and unravel in God’s embrace. Few of us can manage forty days out of circulation, but some kind of wilderness time to focus on God is spiritual food for the soul.

Jesus spent forty days in fasting and prayer, subjected to temptations for his body, soul and mind. We might expect that Jesus would be weakened by the ordeal. Truly, he was famished but rather than being worn out, he came out of that experience with renewed resolve. Surprisingly enough, the time in the wilderness strengthened his heart and soul. There is a conviction he has about him in his responses to the devil which is unmistakable.

These are not the comments of a beaten man. These are not the words of someone who is defeated. He comes out of the wilderness with a message he wants to share. Like his cousin, John the Baptist, Jesus comes out of the wilderness with good news. Famished and thirsty he may be, but the time away has improved his vision.

It seems to me that Jesus resolved in his heart that no healthy relationship with God can come from our trying to manipulate God’s love for us. Jesus resolves that no relationship with God or others can be based upon the temptation to lord power over others; manipulation; deceit or greed. Performing magic acts, masquerading as miracles, upon stones is no basis of relationship with God. The power of God is not about acts of daring-do which deceive and lead astray. To sacrifice at the altar of “always me-first” is to find death and not life.

Jesus emerged from his forty days resolved that there is a more excellent way, as St. Paul is fond of saying. The more excellent way is found in a relationship with God which is rooted in love. Love which rejoices not in trickery or deceit, but in the truth. Love which rejoices not in the selfish ambitions of human manipulation but in what is possible by God’s grace.

Jesus emerged from his time of fasting and prayer with renewed conviction about his relationship and our relationship with his Father in heaven. Maybe you’ve got this relational thing with God all figured out. That’s a good thing. Even so, maybe God is inviting you to spend time in the wilderness to pray about something new that is important to your relationship with God and the world. Jesus had his agenda for his forty days. Thinking this way begs the question of what is God’s agenda for you and for me during our forty days right now. What direction is God encouraging you to take in your prayers during these forty days?

I can tell you that my own hope and prayer is that at the end of these forty days of engaging God in whatever prayerful direction God calls us, that we emerge, like Jesus, with renewed courage; strengthened resolve and abundant hope rooted in our faith in God. May God bless us all in our forty days in the wilderness.

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