

Sermon by Lex Breckinridge - 03/01/2020

The First Sunday in Lent

Matthew 4:1-11

The summer before my senior year in college, I decided it would be a good idea to hitchhike out to the West Coast. You could still do such things in those days and so a friend of mine met me in Virginia, we stuck our thumbs in the wind, and off we went. Down into Tennessee to Interstate 40 and then clear across the country, all the way to Santa Monica where I-40 ends just before the ocean. After staying in LA for a little while – “crashing”, it was called in those days, we set off up the coast on Highway 1. I had never been to California before and, as we used to say, I was blown away. The mountains dropping into the sea were so different from the East Coast beaches that I was used to. And the mountains themselves, brown and scrubby near the coast, but quickly becoming alpine as you ascended, were completely unlike the eastern deciduous forests of my upbringing. As I said, I was blown away.

As we made our way up the coast, I decided that I wanted to explore the interior. I had developed an interest in Zen Buddhism in college, and I was very curious to visit a Zen monastery located at the famous Tassajara Hot Springs in Los Padres Mountains up above Carmel. My friend was eager to get on to San Francisco where his girlfriend lived and so at Carmel we went our separate ways. He went north up to the city, and I headed east up into the Los Padres National Forest in search of Tassajara.

Now, I was an eager young romantic, and I imagined that the monks at the monastery would welcome a seeker like me with open arms. The monastery is located well over 20 miles into the forest. The trail was steep and primitive, and it was going to take a couple of days to get to my destination. So off I went.

I hadn't gotten too far up the trail when I came to a kind of startling revelation. I was all alone. known or expected.

I was intensely uncomfortable.

How was I going to get along without anyone to talk to? No one else knew where I was. What if I got lost? Two hours into the hike and I already had visions of buzzards circling overhead.

OK. Time to turn back. Time to head to the relative security of my friend's house in San Francisco. “No, you can't do that”, my inner voice said. “You can't give up. Just keep putting one foot in front of the another.” And so I did, breathing deeply to keep the panic under control, I made it about 12 miles before darkness began to fall. Making camp for the night, I felt the darkness pressing around me. The silence was oppressive. The chilly air was cutting through me. It was hard to be alone in the wilderness.

Well, I did make it through the night and set out early next morning for the monastery, eager to see what I was sure would be friendly faces. To say that the monks at Tassajara were indifferent to my arrival and to me, would be to wildly exaggerate their hospitality- which turned out to be non-existent. I could wander around and soak in the hot springs, but as far as sharing in any way in the life of the community – well, that wasn't on the menu.

To cut to the chase, I decided to stick around whether they welcomed me or not. I set up my little camp near the hot springs and wound up staying for a couple more days. So why am I going on and on about something that happened over 40 years ago? Because of what I learned from the wilderness. What I learned from the wilderness of the Los Padres National Forest and the Tassajara Hot Springs. More importantly, what I learned in my internal wilderness. A wilderness filled with loneliness, fear, discomfort, and unknowingness.

I learned something about the little demons that dwelt in that interior wilderness and wanted to tempt me into all kinds of things. Like running away towards safety and security. Like running away Like running away to people who knew me and cared for me. Like running away to comfort and control. Those were very tempting demons. I can assure you.

We hear another story of a young man in the wilderness this morning. This young man heard a voice from Heaven telling him he is God's own beloved, and then abruptly this young man has been driven into the wilderness by a power he probably doesn't yet understand. The Spirit has led him there and clearly has led him there for a purpose. It will be in the wilderness that the young man will have his character forged and changed as he confronts his own demons. I actually love the way Mark tells this story. He only uses one sentence and describes it all.

"He was in the wilderness 40 days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him,"

Here is what I like about this. When the spirit drove Jesus into the wilderness, he didn't run away. He didn't try to find a way out. God's beloved accepted the company God gave him in the desert - Satan, wild animals, ministering angels. And there wasn't any drama around it. No preferences expressed. Jesus doesn't waste a lot of time defending himself against what comes his way. Because he knows that everything - everything - comes from God. He knows himself as God's beloved. And he shows us what it means to please God. Whatever comes his way, Jesus allows it to happen without fighting it or running from it. He knows he is God's beloved and he knows that God is with him, shaping him and forming him for his life's great purpose.

So here we are in Lent. Here we are at the beginning of our own 40 days. Will the spirit drive us into the wilderness? Will we allow the Spirit to do that for us?

Do you have some inner demons whose voices are trying to be heard? Sure you do. We all do. We can choose to ignore these voices if we want to. Or run from them. But you know what? They won't go away. We'll need to turn and face them. And you can do that because you are God's own beloved. The story of Jesus being tempted in the wilderness isn't just about Jesus. It's about you too. It's about what you do, or better stated, what you allow God to do with *your* demons.

In my wilderness time, those many years ago, my inner demons weren't the only voices I heard. I heard another voice, a different voice, a voice that said, "You are beloved. You'll be OK." The Love that had been the foundation of my young life was with me in the wilderness. And that Love brought me out on the other side of the wilderness to a new place of confidence and growth. To this day I am glad I chose not to run away.

So enter the wilderness. Each day during Lent, find a place of silence and solitude. The silence might be tough at first. You might find that you have some thoughts and feelings you've been trying to outrun that might catch up with you. And you might find some wild animals, too. Will you stay or will you run away? Will angels minister to you? There's only one way to find out. Head to the wilderness for the next 40 days. Even if it's only for a few minutes a day. Let the Spirit lead you there.

Comfort your demons; hey, you might even think about getting friendly with some of those demons. That may sound strange but what I know is that oftentimes the things that devil us are just shadows of our true selves. When we embrace that demon, love that demon, we might love the demon back to health. But we won't know until we confront the demon, and we won't confront the demon unless we allow the Spirit to lead us into the wilderness. Now is the time, You are God's beloved. Enter the wilderness with confidence.

WH Auden was one of the great poets of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and he was also an Anglican. One of his poems is the text for a hymn in our Hymnal 1982. It's number 463. This poem is an invitation to follow Jesus into the wilderness.