

“Temptations in the Wilderness: Isolation”

Luke 4:1-13' Lamentations 3:1-6, 19-33 – Rev. Rebecca Littlejohn
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Holy God, bless the speaking and the hearing of these words, that we might follow Jesus faithfully on this wilderness journey. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Two years ago, when covid arrived in the middle of Lent and as it was becoming more and more obvious that it wasn't going to be gone by Easter, you heard a lot of people talking about “the Lent that wouldn't end.” Many of the aspects that we traditionally associate with Lent – restrictions, deprivation, lack of celebration, even fear – lasted well past Easter. One year ago, as vaccinations were beginning to become more available and we thought the end was on the horizon, if we could just hold on, we used the word “ENDURE” as our focus, aiming to just keep our heads down and keep going, so that we could come out the other end one day soon.

And yet, as we enter Lent 2022, the pandemic is still with us, and it seems like maybe we're finally admitting that we're going to need to adapt to these circumstances that are less than ideal. My biggest confusion lately is wondering how we'll even truly know when this thing is over. Or will it not really ever be “over,” because whatever will come next simply can't look much like what we had before? At any rate, all of these Lents have offered us, as Lent does every year, a chance to reflect on how the world – God's creation in which we mortals make our home – impacts our faith and our understanding of how to live our lives.

So as we approached Lent this year, the thing that I noticed is how the pandemic has functioned as a wilderness experience for us and how the temptations of our lives have

been heightened because of it, much like happened with Jesus when he was in the wilderness. At a very basic level, it comes down to “hangry.” You know hangry; it’s when you’re so hungry it makes you angry. Hangry is a basic reality of the human condition, both literally and metaphorically. And Jesus’ experience in the wilderness is all about hangry. He didn’t eat for forty days, Luke says, and he was “famished.” I’m guessing any one of us could make a list of the things we should try to avoid doing when we’re famished. Grocery shopping, having important conversations with our family members, disciplining children, working on bills, trying to fix a computer, trying to call the insurance company, driving in traffic... what would you add? When we’re hungry, there is really only one thing we should be doing, and that’s figuring out how we can get something to eat as soon as possible. Hunger makes us short-tempered and snappish, even explosive. It’s a wonder the devil departed with his head still intact.

Simply put, there are many behaviors we know we shouldn’t act out that we’re much more likely to inflict on others if we’re hungry. And more broadly, when we’ve been through this extended period of deprivation and uncertainty, behaviors and attitudes that we used to easily avoid become bigger temptations. Our defenses against acting like jerks have worn down, because we’re worn out. We’ve been in the wilderness for a long time, so our capacity to be civilized has taken a hit.

I wonder if our experience with the pandemic has made it more possible for us to understand Jesus’ time in the wilderness. It’s always seemed sort of far-removed to me. Fasting for 40 days seems unworldly and impossible. But it’s hard to imagine this story

without it. Would there have been a story if the devil came to tempt Jesus on an ordinary day when he'd had a good breakfast? If he were surrounded by the people and places that helped him remember who and whose he was? Without the fasting in the wilderness, this story doesn't make any sense.

Back in the before-times, most of the time, we didn't have that much trouble being relatively decent people. But it's gotten harder. As our spirits have weathered the restrictions and debates and confusion and fear and loss of the pandemic, our capacity to not give in to certain temptations has been weakened. So rather than pretend that the whole thing will be gone soon and everything will go back to "normal," we decided to face some of those temptations head on over the next few weeks, and think about how Jesus' example can help us find our way through.

The temptation we're going to start with this week – isolation – might seem like a throw-back to the first few months of the pandemic. Things got weird fast when we went into lock-down so quickly. But if we're honest, we have to admit that the consequences of that enforced isolation are still rippling through our lives and our psyches today. Part of that is because of how differently different people reacted to that isolation. For some, it was an unexpectedly welcome respite from having to "people" more than we were comfortable with anyway. For others, it was a torture near to death. For families that depended on larger support structures, particularly those at schools, it was a source of stress and decreased resources. For those who had to keep going to work because their jobs were "essential," the isolation was a privilege they had to watch others experiencing

without having access to it themselves. So the isolation laid bare many of the divisions in our society that we normally try to keep invisible.

As things started to open back up, though, we began to see what this temporary experience of isolation had done to us. Some people didn't want to come back. Others rushed back to socializing while it was still pretty risky. We didn't always even remember how to be around other people very well. This is going to sound like a weird analogy, but it reminds me of when my church in Alabama did our bylaws revisions. We drew up an alternate structure, which changed most of what we had, but not all of it. So we just approved a motion to suspend the parts of the old bylaws that were affected by the new structure, for three years. We planned to assess every year, and then at the end of three years, compare our experience with the new structure with our experience of the old structure, and keep what worked through a harmonization of both sets of bylaws. What we didn't take into account was the degree to which our church would change in those three years. By about year two, we didn't really remember the old structure. We had new people who had never been part of the church with the old ways and therefore had nothing to compare it to. By the end of three years, there was no question of going back to the old ways, because no one could even remember what they'd been like. (And in truth, they hadn't been very functional to begin with, which was why we were trying something new.)

If we live with a constantly changing way of living for long enough, we forget how things used to be. With no clear end date to this pandemic, it seems likely we'll never go back to the way things were before. There were certain benefits that the enforced isolation

brought us, like making our worship services and our ministry meetings more accessible for those who can't leave their homes.

But there are other ways that isolation can be a temptation we need to strengthen our resolve to avoid. Many of us have a tendency to withdraw into ourselves when we're going through hard times. When we are sick, though some want lots of attention and tending to, others prefer to be left alone, to suffer in solitude. Often times, we indulge in isolation when being with others is precisely the medicine we need. This becomes even easier when getting together is more complicated and we have more excuses not to. It's harder to talk ourselves into getting out and about and together with others when our habits of doing so have worn away. For those of us who like to nest in at home, whether for our own good or to our detriment, the pandemic has heightened the temptation to do it all the time, even when it's not healthy.

There are other forms of isolation that have grown as threats in this wilderness we're wandering. The suffering of our world has been heightened in so many ways over the past two years. The temptation to shut out awareness of the pain that other people are going through is high, when so much of the news is so hard to hear. Whether it's the war in Ukraine or the war-induced famine in Yemen, whether it's the current or cumulative death toll of the coronavirus or the continual travesty of police violence enacted on Black and Brown neighbors, we often prefer to isolate ourselves from problems that don't directly affect us. We tune it out and occupy our minds with happier amusements instead. We forget that isolating ourselves from the suffering of the world is a direct violation of Jesus'

command to love our neighbors. When we do bother to look, the situations seem so intractable that we're tempted by seemingly easy solutions rooted in the logic of violence. If the devil were to offer us all the splendor and authority of all the kingdoms of the world, we might take it, thinking we could use it to end all the wars. But that's not how power works, as Jesus showed us. And if we weren't so isolated, we would see that more clearly for ourselves.

So how do we learn from Jesus, alone in the wilderness, how to avoid the temptations of isolation? First of all, we must learn discernment, so we can see the distinction between solitude and isolation. Jesus was on his own out there, but he wasn't disconnected from God or his community. But secondly, we must understand that our periods of solitude are times of preparation and restoration, not an end unto themselves. God created us for community. We will all engage with community in different ways, and perhaps this wilderness experience of separation has taught us how to open our communities to that diversity of experience more fruitfully. But Jesus' example can also teach us how to dig down deep and recognize what we really need, not just what seems most attractive in the moment. When the devil offered famished Jesus bread, he surely must have wanted it, just as much as we want to leave our weary souls in bed instead of getting up to go to church. But he knew that the true nourishment was not to be found in that devil bread, but in turning back to God. When isolation tempts us, we too need to turn back to God, by turning to one another with hearts of humble compassion. May it be so. Amen.