

## 01 March 2020 – The First Sunday of Lent: Matthew 4:1-11

In the 1840's it was easy to see the route taken by settlers who struck out to find new lives in the American West. The signs that marked the way were discarded belongings. Almost everyone started with overloaded wagons, being ignorant of the challenges that lay ahead. Along the trail one would see furniture—some ornate and expensive—cast aside; extra clothing, household items and luxuries; books, knick-knacks, even food; in places the debris literally made a kind of avenue in the wilderness. The load carried had to be lightened or they would never make it to the end; the extra, useless and extravagant, however much clung to in the past, had to be left behind. The wilderness clarifies, brings life to a point, if you will.

For the Israelites, the desert was the road of rescue from Egyptian slavery; they, too, had to let go of possessions and security. In today's Gospel Jesus, too, is in the wilderness. The people of the Exodus fell through disobedience; this Son will not. Jesus' answers to temptation are from Chapters 6-8 of Deuteronomy. This is not happenstance: Jesus undoes the former rebellion, re-establishing an eternal covenant with God.

Jesus is asked to use his power for his own comfort. He replies that security is doing what God desires. He is asked to prove God's love for him. Jesus answers that God's faithful care is constant. Jesus will be given the whole world if he worships a false god; he says there is only one God to worship and serve.

There is always a struggle between the truth of God in Jesus, and the lies of the evil one which brings slavery, suffering and death. The contest is in the wilderness of the human heart, in our daily lives. Do we recognize the wilderness challenge: are we traveling with eyes open, with Christ or, are we stumbling blindly, weighed down? So much of contemporary life is a wasteland. We can numb ourselves with excessive food and drink; we titillate ourselves with incessant images of violence and sex; we exploit the human body made in God's image to sell trinkets; we are consumed with the vacuous lives of 'celebrities'; we exploit the earth for our comfort. We pamper our bodies, cloud our minds, worship things instead of the One who made all things; and we crave more and more and more. It is simply a fact that we live in a society in which conspicuous excess is considered normal, even our due. We, too, are in a wilderness engaged in spiritual combat and we surely carry a load of the excessive, the ineffectual and the worthless.

We come to Lent. For 2000 years, Christians have run into the wilderness with Jesus for both the struggle and the victory. St. Augustine wrote: "You are perfectly aware that Christ was tempted, but do you not see that he has carried off the victory? Recognize yourself in him in his temptation, recognize yourself in him in his victory." (Commentary on Psalm 60).

The disciplines of Lent are a mirror, to help us see ourselves. We are to hear the Scriptures, the Liturgy, holy writers, listen to our own lives, and respond with obedience. Lent is a mirror, as is every true wilderness, because as you begin a regimen of fasting, fervent prayer, serious Bible study, spiritual reading and intentional works of mercy, you will see your own weakness, divided loyalties, disobedience, apathy. In the wilderness, good intentions are not enough; possessions are burdens; wealth is useless; social standing meaningless. In the wilderness, we will decide whether to continue living a life of futility, or we will throw ourselves on the mercy and loving-kindness of Jesus Christ.

Here is the open secret to not just surviving the desert but finding joy: the mercy and loving-kindness of Jesus. He is the pioneer and perfecter of our faith. Jesus knows the way, has already travelled the course, and he will be with us always. Just as the spirits of the early Western settlers lifted with every step closer to their new home, just as their progress became easier as they cast aside the useless, just as their wilderness transformed them into strong, capable members of a remarkable people, so a good Lent lifts our spirits, transforms us into capable, strong, joyful followers of Jesus.

May your Lent be a wilderness. May you leave behind the useless, extravagant and distracting. May your journey always deeper into Jesus' love. Amen.