

**Back to The Wilderness©****Matthew 4:1-11****1<sup>st</sup> Sunday in Lent****Rev. Sharlyn Gates****March 9, 2014**

Last week, we remembered Jesus was transfiguration – that is, the three disciples whom Jesus took up to the mountain with him, saw him changed, shining in all his divine glory, hearing the voice of God proclaiming “This is my Son, my beloved. Listen to him!

Remember how afraid they were; so afraid they fell to the ground in fear? And Jesus said, “Get up. Do not be afraid.” And they began the journey down the mountain and into the weeks that would be the most difficult days of their lives as Jesus was headed to the cross.

Now, it’s time for us to “Get up; to not be afraid, but to go back to the Wilderness for 40 days of Lent. We don’t take much with us on this journey into the wilderness. There is no need to drag a heavy bag of stuff. In fact, it is that heavy bag of stuff that we are hoping to let go of; to give to God as we place our trust in Him.

So what do we take with us? And why do we make this Wilderness journey now anyway? And, as a whiny child might say – “Do we HAVE to? I don’t want to go! It’s too long. It’s boring out there. I don’t like the music – all sad and slow and funeral like. Can’t we just keep busy doing what we’re doing, singing hallelujah, decorating Easter eggs and getting ready for the celebration?”

And the answer is – YES. You can keep doing what you’re doing. NO. You certainly do NOT have to make the trip. And some of you will probably decide not to. There is no judgment here. No condemnation if you choose not to go along. It is your decision.

And while Sunday’s are not actually part of the 40 days of Lent, and Sundays are the remembrance and celebration of the Lord’s resurrection – you might still get tired of the slower, sad songs of the Lenten Season.

Yes, you can choose to skip the wilderness and jump all the way to Easter. But you will miss out on so much if you do it that way. Just as the Spirit called Jesus to the wilderness after his baptism – the Spirit of God also woos us to that desert place where we can struggle with where we are in our faith life, with what we’ve taken on since the last Lenten reflection that has been a distraction to our relationship with our Creator and with one another as the people of God.

The wilderness can be a lonely, dry place – hot in the day and cold at night. There is a noticeable lack of noise and activity – at least the noise we are used to, the busyness of our daily lives.

That is what I think the Lenten journey is about. Being willing to set aside the ordinary distractions and focus on where we are in our relationship with God, who loves to love

us, who wants to be God. It is about looking inside ourselves to see if we have turned things around and begun to fool ourselves into thinking WE are God or that we don't need God because of our own self-sufficiency.

The Gospel writer of Matthew includes this story of Jesus being tested in the wilderness for this very reason, I think. Jesus had just been baptized and then, Matthew says, he was LED by the Spirit, into the wilderness. It was the Spirit of God wooing him to this place alone with God where he could pray and contemplate what was really ahead of him.

We are told that the Satan (a name used for the tempter) is there, not to question whether or not Jesus is the true Son of God, but to test Jesus – to try to persuade him to use his divinity for his own human cravings – food after he has been fasting for a long time; power when he is at a weak point; and protection when he is most vulnerable.

Jesus, being the Son of God, declined to use miracles for his own desires, but instead, Matthew tells us, Jesus quoted Scripture – from Deuteronomy – to strengthen and sustain him and to help him to stay strong in the test.

We are told in Paul's letter to the Roman Church, that Jesus was tempted in every way that we are, yet he did not sin. If you think about it, the greatest temptation was to take on his own glory (which he had given up to come to us), instead of depending on God for strength. His determination to trust in God to be God and to be obedient in his humanness is what we look at as our role model.

And, wouldn't you agree, if you really think about it, that our greatest temptation is to try to be so self sufficient, so determined to take care of ourselves, so concerned about someone else having the upper hand over us, that, without realizing it, we put ourselves in God's place.

So, what is it that we take on this trip to the wilderness; this 40 day journey through the days of Lent until we get to the other side of the cross where forgiveness and grace have the day and where the alleluias ring loud and sure?

First, we take ourselves – completely. We need to be fully present. That means that we might have to give up something – perhaps some television, Facebook time, or a night out, or even perhaps some extra work that could possibly wait a little while ... because there is more important work to be done.

Many people choose to fast during Lent. They decide to give up something they really love – a food – meat, sugar, caffeine, the list is long.

Why fast? What is the purpose of fasting? I think the idea of fasting is the same type of thing as going to the wilderness. It is to learn to depend on God when you are longing

to fulfill your own needs. It is to spend that time listening and praying and allowing yourself to be vulnerable. A fast can be anything that gives you a time to contemplate your spiritual life.

We also probably want to take a Bible. Jesus said --- when Satan tempted him to turn stones into bread, ---- “People don’t live on bread alone, but by the Word that comes from the mouth of God.” Reading and knowing – embodying the Word of God ---- gives strength and hope in times of weakness and despair.

When getting ready to leave for the journey of Lent, downsizing is key. Asking ourselves, “What DON’T we really need? What can I do without, so that I can turn my focus on trusting God and renewing my strength in Him? Traveling light is important.

There is one other important thing for the journey. While we each have our own thoughts and particular distractions that take our focus off of our life of faith – we are not alone on this journey. We should not ever be alone on the journey. We are the people of God together – the followers of the one who resisted the temptation to use his glory for his own sake, knowing that giving himself completely would mean love and grace and forgiveness for all of us. It would mean transformation as we are changed more and more into the image of Christ.

Christ has called us to be his Body – his Church. Our wilderness journey is to be together and together we look at our lives as the church. We confess our corporate sin of not trusting God enough, of worrying about ourselves instead of taking his mission to heart. We ask for and receive mercy and assurance of forgiveness. We are renewed as a people, and we will arrive *together* on Easter with great revival and joy.

If you have not started yet, it’s not too late. You can join the journey right now, on this day, and travel into the wilderness knowing with all faith and trust that it will be a most meaningful Lenten season.

Oh, the other thing to be sure and take with you on this journey: your 3-D Vision for Lent – Discipleship (following Jesus all the way!); Devotion (your heart is devoted to the one who was so devoted to you that he gave his life for you); and Dialog (always praying, talking to the One who loves you most and who walks with you on this journey, who talks to you and shows you all the things you need to see.)

May God make his presence known to us as travel this road to together. Amen.