

Wilderness Journey

Sermon

preached on 1st Sunday in Lent (February 10), 2008

in Heidelberg-Rohrbach

Genesis 2:4b-9, 15-17, 25-3:7; Psalm 51(:1-13); Romans 5:12-19(20-21); Matthew 4:1-11

“Forty days and forth nights.” The hymn we sang at the beginning of today’s service has made it definitely clear, if we hadn’t noticed it already by the difference of colour, that we are in a new season of the Church’s year: Lent. Liturgically, this means not only another colour, purple for repentance, but also no Gloria, no Alleluia, no Blessing—for the place of the Blessing is taken by the Prayer over the People, for which I invite you to remaining kneeling after the Postcommunion Prayer.

Our 40-day Lenten journey began on Ash Wednesday. On that day we were marked with ashes as a sign of penitence and mortality. In words “Remember that thou art dust,” we were told, “and to dust thou shalt return.”ⁱ Mortality. If we open our eyes we may see all around us the truth of that old hymn “Media in vita in morte sumus.” In the midst of life we are caught by death. And if we open our ears we can still hear people crying, “My God, why?” Why does God permit so much death and suffering?

St Paul in today’s epistle reading, relying on the story from Genesis which we heard first, deals with just this question. “Death came through sin.” This fifth chapter of St Paul’s letter to the Christians in Rome appears to be very difficult reading, and it would take us more than one sermon to explain it in full. “Sin came into the world through one man—one man, a non-inclusive statement to which feminists would perhaps not object here—and death came through sin, and so death spread to all because all have sinned.” And: “Just as one man’s trespass led to condemnation for all, so one man’s act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all.” And so on. Reading something like that we may feel reminded of Philip’s question to the Ethiopian eunuch: “Do you understand what you are reading?”ⁱⁱ I hesitate to answer it by an unqualified Yes. Perhaps, in the end we cannot say much more than “God acts in a mysterious way.”

But today, I think, we can leave all these intricacies aside and just keep to the basic statement that death and sin, righteousness and life are inseparably linked together.

This does not mean of course that we can link an individual person’s death, or illness, or misfortune, with his or her personal sinfulness. We only need to remember Jesus’ question: “Those eighteen on whom the tower at Siloam fell, killing them all? Do you suppose that they were more guilty than all the other people living in Jerusalem? They were not, I tell you.”ⁱⁱⁱ

But generally, sin and death belong together. So the ashes of last Wednesday remind us of our sinfulness and the need of repentance as well as of our mortality.

But repentance and the consciousness of mortality are not just about weeping and wailing. St Paul sets a powerful counterpoint to sin and death: justification and life for all. We need not despair seeing that we time and again fail to do good and accomplish what God’s law demands of us. We are indeed unable to achieve true life by our own strength or our own cleverness. But “one man’s good act has brought justification and life to all humanity.” We may rely on God’s grace made manifest in the redeeming work of Christ. Justification is obtained—as theologians say—by faith, not by works.

But this doesn't mean, of course, we may just sit back and relax because Jesus has done all the work for us. John the Baptist knew this already when he said to the Pharisees and Sadducees, "Produce fruit in keeping with repentance."^{iv} And Jesus himself warns his disciples—us— "If your righteousness does not surpass that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never get into the kingdom of Heaven."^v

"Fruit in keeping with repentance", not works to earn justification—that is what Lent, the 40 days leading us up to Easter, is about.

Immediately after his baptism, "Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil." We all know this old and mythical story, and we may have, time and again, mused what really happened, then, and what it should mean to us. And why those people who made the order of readings put it just at the beginning of Lent.

"Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness." Wilderness—desert: that seems to be far away from us here. But it is not. Even if we take the word literally we need only to remember that 35 years ago only, James Pike, one-time Episcopal Bishop of California, set out from Jerusalem with a jeep for an afternoon's visit to Qumran, took a wrong turn, ended up in the Judean desert, and died. If you try to go for such a visit from Jerusalem to Qumran today you may experience quite another, but no less dangerous wilderness.

However, we need not travel thus far. If we look at our cities, spiritually, does not the word "wilderness" come to our mind quite easily? And this wilderness has its temptations also. I leave it up to you to find the appropriate examples. No problem, I am sure.

There will be many occasions when body and soul make a journey into what we may call wilderness. From our birth to the time of our return to God, we have ample opportunities to experience a journey that will lead us into and, hopefully, out of life's wilderness. We may view our journeys into the wilderness, as times in which God prepares us for a task. We may also view the wilderness as a place where the spiritual strength of our souls is refined and strengthened. "Our spirits strengthen with thy grace."

Temptation in the wilderness. Temptation is part of everyone's life. The test to overcome temptation toward evil will always be an inescapable part of our earthly journey. But throughout this life, we may be strengthened by St Paul's words to the Corinthians: "No testing has overtaken you that is not common to everyone. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tested beyond your strength, but with the testing he will also provide the way out so that you may be able to endure it."^{vi} Today, our Old and New Testament readings provide a window of opportunity toward our finding a way out of the wilderness.

In the Old Testament Book called Genesis, we witness how temptation toward evil led Adam and Eve to an act of faithlessness and sin. In contrast our Gospel, from St Matthew, shows how Jesus Christ relied on faith in God's Word and authority. And we witness Christ's deliverance from the evil temptations that lead to sin. At the root of today's readings is our willingness to be faithful and obedient to God. The question before us today—and always—is this: What kind of Christians are we going to be—faithful or wayward?

So in wilderness moments, what shall we do? During our Lenten journeys—and for the rest of our lives—how will we prepare ourselves to overcome that permanent inclination toward sinfulness and selfishness? How will we find our way out of the wilderness?

It is Jesus' experience in the wilderness that provides the key for us. Our Lord's experience demonstrates that there are three spiritual tools for finding our way out of the wilderness. These tools are prayer, fasting, and faith in the Word of God.

First of all, Jesus prayed. "Lord, who throughout these forty days for us didst fast and pray." St Matthew doesn't mention the praying in his story, but in Luke we read that Jesus, when he had been baptized, prayed, and then the Spirit led him into the wilderness, and we may trust he didn't stop praying there. So we, whenever we enter into life's wilderness, need to be in conversation with God. Prayer and meditative reflection—listening for God's voice—will always guide us through life's most difficult moments.

Secondly, Jesus fasted. Fasting does not just mean depriving oneself of something. Jesus purified himself—body, mind, and soul—of everything that obscured his life-link to God. In other words, as it has been said: Jesus fasted from the world and feasted on the Word of God.

Thirdly, Jesus relied on the foundation of faith. Standing on the promises of God, Jesus relied on the promise that his Heavenly Father—some would prefer to say "his Heavenly Parent"—would save him, would deliver him from the time of trial.

We need to understand these tools for our own wilderness journeys in life, and for the righteousness the world expects from us as we witness for our Lord.

Immediately after Jesus came out of the wilderness, he began his ministry. So we, whenever we emerge from our wilderness experience, are called to do the same, to take upon us our role as messengers of Christ and tell people - by our words and even more by our deeds - the story of God's glory, the story of God's glorious love. Amen.

ⁱ BCP, p. 265.

ⁱⁱ Act 8:30.

ⁱⁱⁱ Luk 13:4-5.

^{iv} Mat 3:7-8.

^v Mat 5:20.

^{vi} 1Co 10:13.