

BEING IN THE WILDERNESS

Lord may the meditations of my heart and the words of my lips be acceptable in your sight. AMEN

During the last week, I really enjoyed hearing about all the joy and celebration of last Sunday's baptisms at the 10:00 am service. Just before Jesus was led into the wilderness by the Spirit, he was baptized in the waters of the Jordan River, where a heavenly voice confirmed his identity as God's beloved Son.

Resurrection Community is echoing this scripture narrative today. Last Sunday, there were joyful baptisms celebrating beloved children of God. Today we are being led into the wilderness during our First Sunday in Lent. In fact, we began our wilderness journey on Ash Wednesday as we heard the solemn words "Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return."

Pondering these words, we could envision that the season of Lent gives us a chance to once again realize that our journey on earth is temporary. More importantly, Lent emphasizes' that how we live out our journey can make all the difference not just in our lives but to our companions who live out the journey with us.

There are words which are part of a hymn written by Bernadette Farrell thirty-three years ago in 1993 which reminds us that we not only have companions in our earthly journey but that we are called to mission to them. In these words, we hear, even today, the often-repeated whispers of our companions' longings, for the hymn proclaims:

Longing for food, many are hungry.
Longing for water, many still thirst.
Longing for peace, our world is troubled.
Longing for hope, many despair.
Longing for shelter, many are homeless.
Longing for warmth, many are cold.
Longing for light, many wait in darkness.

Jesus' time in the wilderness had everything to do about his mission. Commentaries seem to have two different thoughts about today's gospel reading.

The first commentary highlights the concept of God's covenant relationship with his people – both the old covenant of the Israelites and Jesus - the new covenant. This narrative parallels Jesus' sojourn with Israel's journey in the wilderness. It sees Jesus' ministry as a reliving of the spiritual experience of Israel. We see this echoed in Jesus' response to each temptation which comes from the book of Deuteronomy.

The second commentary suggests that the devil's temptations are spoken to twist the spiritual actions of Jesus and his ministry. The first test was to invite Jesus into the role of a popular leader for the eradication of hunger and poverty. The second temptation was to trade upon the Messiah's relationship with God, to achieve a reputation as a wonderworker and so succeed in securing the attention of people away from the spiritual to the personhood of Jesus. The third test was to encourage Jesus to compromise with evil, to recognize the devil's dominion to the point of regarding some people and situations as beyond hope of redemption.

In each of these temptations, we see that Jesus' response is generated from his deep relationship with God the Father. Jesus' victory in his struggles turned into hope for the world. Jesus' mission birthed our mission to the world.

This brings us back to what I believe Lent represents, which is renewing our spiritual relationship with the Lord and pondering on our call to mission. For Lent gives us time to *orient ourselves toward* the divine in our journey. Lent is a time when we filter worldly and spiritual temptations. For instance, I may have the temptation to eat too many chocolates which is not good for my physical body. Yet, more importantly, in Lent, I look at my soul and see what I do which may be separating me from the Lord and the mission which he has blessed me with in my life.

Jesus time in the wilderness reminds us that we have the need to stay rooted in the Lord, whether by prayer, scripture, listening in a divine silent conversation or reaching out to experience other spiritual practices.

Jesus' victory in his struggles went far beyond his time in the wilderness. His victory over temptations turned into hope for the world. Professor Julie E. Neraas, in her book *"Apprenticed to Hope"*, states; "The symbol used to represent hope by the early Christian community was an anchor. Like an anchor on a boat, hope can steady a person. Hope was what grounded those first-century Christians in God amid the turbulence and persecution of the Roman Empire. Having to cope with that level of chaos, it must have been strengthening to know where their true harbor lay, and it was certainly not in material well-being. It lay deeper, in a confidence that their lives were held in the embrace of a loving God."

In addition, this author noted; "In the medieval world, the church translated the symbol of an anchor into a religious vocation. The practice of "anchorage" is from the Greek word meaning "to withdraw", and was a form of hermitage, widespread in Europe for several centuries. Julian of Norwich was an anchoress in the medieval world. The anchoress lived a life of prayer, cultivating rootedness in God away from the busyness of conventional society and making her an anchor for others. Her prayer rooted her in hope. She said with confidence: 'All will be well, and all manners of things will be well.' The hope she experienced was always counter to the status quo. And just as Jesus' hope, it was grounded in the sovereignty of God."

So, what constitutes our hope?

I believe our hope is that we can endure and overcome our struggles because Christ is right here with us in the middle of our wilderness experiences. Lent is not easy. Lent reminds us that our life is not just filled with bright wonderful times and happy feelings. It reminds us that times can be difficult. We can struggle but that is alright because the Lord is in the mix.

Returning to Bernedette Farrell's hymn, it has a title perfect for Lenten prayer which is: "*Christ be our light!*". Lent calls us to reach out to the Lord to renew our soul, throw off our mirage of self-sufficiency and make it through our daily journey in this world wrapped in a real-life covenant relationship with Christ and each person of our church community.

Lent reminds us that we and our community are kept safe in the loving arms of the Lord. Lent reminds us that we are blessed by our Resurrection Church Community members who pray with us and for us.

The final verses of the hymn, "*Christ be our Light!*" proclaim:

Many the gifts, many the people,
Many the hearts that yearn to belong.
Let us be servants to one another,
Making the Lord's kingdom come.

During this Lent, may Christ, be our light! By our words and actions, may we encourage each person we meet to be a part of the kingdom of light!

AMEN