

A-Lent 1, 2008  
St. Luke's, Renton, WA  
Kevin Pearson, Preacher

Matthew 4.1-11

One of the props in the Godly Play classroom is called the Desert Box. The Desert Box is a handsome, shallow box about 3 feet square with an oak frame and Plexiglas sides and top. The box is half-full of sand, and when the lid is removed, and the sandy space is revealed, the Desert Box becomes a completely “other” context in which to tell a story.

Godly Play teachers and students love the Desert Box. There is a mystique about this “other place”: the desert place where so many of the stories of our faith are told. Invariably, teachers invite this mystique by swooping their hand across the sand and saying, “The desert is a wild and dangerous place, anything can happen in the desert.”

The desert is the site of Israel's wandering for 40 years, between their liberation from Egypt until their entrance into the Promised Land. 40 years without a place to call home. 40 years depending on the providence of God. 40 years of with a law on their hearts and a vision in their heads and nothing but shifting sand under their feet. We've read the stories. We know a whole lot of complaining went on. We know that in the choice between fidelity to God and infidelity, Israel, more often than not, chose infidelity. They chose other gods. And time and time again, in the desert, they repented and returned to God. The desert is indeed a wild and dangerous place where anything can happen.

Our gospel lesson on the first Sunday of Lent is always the story of Jesus being driven out into the desert for 40 days (hint). 40 days of testing. He has just been baptized by John. The narrative voice tells us that the clouds had parted, the Spirit of God descended on him like a dove, and a voice in the sky has said, “This is my son, the beloved, with him I am well pleased.” And in the very next instant, Jesus is driven into the desert. There, in the desert, all of the world's notions of what makes somebody somebody are offered in exchange for Jesus' obedience: the ability to sustain oneself with food; the ability to avert risk, danger, and harm; and the ability to possess and control others and other kingdoms.

Imagine 40 days in the wilderness ... heck, imagine after one day in the barren desert ... wouldn't these desires be forefront on your mind? Food, safety, control.

Yet, for a people of faith—a people whose God has promised to provide if they but trust God, taking matters of sustenance, security, and control into their own hands are a mighty temptation. For Jesus, whose identity and vocation are found in his fidelity to God, the tempter's offers are a real test.

This story frames our Lenten experience. It is as if the church has wheeled the Desert Box into our midst, taken the lid off, placed us in it, and said, “The desert is a wild and dangerous place; anything can happen in the desert, have a nice Lent.”

There is a long-revered spirituality, called the spirituality of the desert. In fact, the very beginnings of monastic life emerged from the practice of the, so called, Desert Fathers—Christians who moved to the Egyptian desert beginning in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century. From St. Anthony of Egypt in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century to St. Augustine of Hippo (which is also Egypt) in the 5<sup>th</sup>



century, and many between them were all shaped by this desert experience. They took up residence in caves amidst the vast emptiness and void of the desert in order to be alone with God. They gave up the comforts of civilization in order to gain self-awareness and intimacy with God.

Desert spirituality has made a real come-back in recent times. While few people are running off to live in caves, people are finding the silent space to move deeply into themselves. Guided, in some cases therapeutically with a psychotherapist and in some cases spiritually with a spiritual director, they are getting to that open desert within oneself. It's not always a peaceful place. It can be a dangerous place with many demons and dragons each with an offer to lure us away from honesty and our true selves and to halt a relationship of intimacy with God.

That way into the desert bears great likeness to our Lenten pilgrimage of faith. What must ever be kept clear is that Lent is a time of special devotion *in preparation for* Easter's joy. Lent has a purpose. Lent has a direction. It is a time bent on our deeper en-joy-ment of life with God. Of course, all the chatter about Lent is on what we are depriving ourselves of. But the real focus is that we are depriving ourselves, opening ourselves, engaging a particular discipline *so that we may come to a deeper awareness of joy.*

The path to that deeper awareness, however, is often work. For what stands in our way to God, what stands in our way to joy, is a lot of crap that we have collected on life's journey that needs to be unloaded.

Consider the story of Adam and Eve and God and the serpent. What happens when Adam and Eve fall prey to the serpent's suggestion and disobey God? "Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made loincloths for themselves." What is the first thing to enter into the lives of the metaphorical first family in their disobedience? Shame. They learned shame. They learned to shame their bodies. They aren't OK the way they are anymore. They learned to shame the intimacy of relationship they had previously enjoyed. Who taught you to shame?

Take that to the desert and find a way to turn your shame into love.

What else? What else happened in that metaphorical garden of Eden? Adam and Eve and God enjoyed a relationship of idyllic intimacy. Then enters Mr. Snake. He catches up with Eve unawares, slithers up to her and says, "Hey baby, ain't nothin' gonna happen to you if you eat of that tree in the middle of the Garden, God just wants to keep you down baby." And Eve goes to Adam and says, "Hey baby, ain't nothin' gonna happen to us if we eat of that tree in the middle of the Garden, God just wants to keep us down baby." And they join together against God, and the perfect balance falls flat.

In psychological terms we call this triangulation. It's a way of transferring our own anxiety onto someone else by making them out to be at fault. It ruins relationships, breaks community, and it's wrong. Ah, but is there anything more tempting? Is there anything we wouldn't rather do that to get our crap off our own back and onto someone else's?

Or we could deal with it in the desert—a place where we may come to learn to recognize our own anxiety and deal with it appropriately and not to take on another's'. In the desert, we may come to see ourselves as God sees us and knows us: a people deeply loved. And on that journey we may become faithful to God, rather than fearful.



Well, those are learnings to span a lifetime. You don't need to do it all in one Lent. But consider the invitation to the desert as a way to life.

You know, it may well be that Lent is my favorite season; because, the journey's end is in Easter's victory of life over death, love over fear, intimacy over separateness, connection over disintegration. The road we began on Ash Wednesday culminates at the Easter Vigil with the pronouncement of Pascal Light that gives life to the world. Whatever discipline you have discerned as the way for you to embrace this journey, make sure its focus is on the deepening of joy that is now and will ever be yours in the risen life of Christ. What a task! What a journey!