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Lent 1, Year A
The Rev. Jack Alvey

Life Without the Cross is No Life at All

In middle school, one of our required books was *The Giver* by Lois Lowry. In more recent years it's been turned into a movie. Needless to say, the book is better than the movie!

The book is about a community that tries to erase suffering by eliminating strong emotions. No grief. No sorrow. No joy. No love. The world is predictable. Everything is black and white – literally. No gray areas. No room for surprises.

The main character, Jonas, is chosen to be the “Receiver of Memory.” He becomes the one person in the community who carries the memories of how the world used to be - before it was sanitized. He received memories of a world filled with love and pain, color and music, beauty and war, loss and longing.

When Jonas begins to receive those memories, he weeps. You might say this is when he becomes fully human. He feels joy and grief, love and loss. To be human is to feel. And to feel is to be vulnerable. There is no way around it.

And yet, we shy away from vulnerability all the time. In our defense, it is scary to feel vulnerable. So, we put up walls. We try not to feel too much, so we don't get hurt too much.

And in doing so, we rarely stop to ask what depriving ourselves of feeling is actually costing us. It has been said that God became fully human so that we might become divine. It is also true to say that God became fully human so that we might become fully human.

In this morning's gospel, we see what being fully human looks like. We often read this story as a lesson in how to be stronger – on how to resist temptation. But I wonder if the story is showing us what it means to be human – to accept our weaknesses and vulnerabilities instead of trying to avoid them.

The devil offers Jesus a world that sounds very much like the one Jonas lived in before receiving memory – a world with no more hunger, no more vulnerability, no more pain. Jesus rejects that offer. Not because he is indifferent to pain and suffering. He rejects the devil's world because it is an illusion – a promise of life without a cross, healing without cost.

It sounds like life. But it really isn't.

From the very beginning, humanity has believed there is a way to escape our limits – a way to have it all without bearing the cost. In Genesis, the serpent promises that we can have

more without consequence. Adam and Eve believed that lie – and they experienced the consequences. And if we're honest, we still believe that lie, too.

Even though he could have, Jesus does not take the shortcut. He refuses the lie. He doesn't turn stones into bread. He doesn't leap from the temple. He doesn't conquer the kingdoms of the world. He takes the long road, the road that leads to the cross.

And that is the journey Lent invites us to take – not over or around the wilderness, but through it.

If we're honest, we still want the world the devil offers. We want to be the best without giving our best. We want forgiveness without repentance. This is what Bonhoeffer called "cheap grace." We want Easter without Good Friday.

But as the old spiritual says, you can't wear the crown if you don't bear the cross. Any promise of life that avoids the cross is an illusion.

The good news is that Jesus has gone ahead of us into the wilderness and all the way to the cross and beyond. And because he has walked that wilderness road, he is able to carry us through it. He is the way, the truth, and the life.

While we are on the topic, there is a temptation hidden in the season of Lent itself. The temptation to prove to God, to others, and maybe even to ourselves, that we can make our way through the wilderness on our own.

The season of Lent is not a try-harder, do-better season. Lent is not about becoming superhuman. It is about bringing our full humanity, our hunger, our weakness, our limits, before God.

Lent is about learning to trust the only one who can truly give us life. It is about learning to trust God even when the road ahead looks barren and lifeless.

While the liturgical calendar marks Lent as forty days in the spring, most of us know that wilderness seasons are not confined to the calendar. They come at different times of the year, and they often last much longer than forty days.

For some, the wilderness looks like a cancer diagnosis and a long road with no clear promises. For others, it is a season without work. For some, it is a stretch of time when God feels distant or silent. And for others, it comes in the wake of a relationship that has left you depleted.

When we find ourselves on roads like these, the temptation to take a shortcut grows stronger.

When we are physically, emotionally, and spiritually famished, we cling to the first reasonable offer that comes our way – even if that offer ultimately betrays our humanity.

Sometimes the shortcut looks like self-medicating, so we do not have to feel the pain of loss. Sometimes it looks like grasping for control when life feels out of control. Sometimes it looks like holding a grudge, so we do not have to admit that we, too, are part of the problem. Sometimes it looks like staying mad because it feels easier than being sad.

Those shortcuts may make the wilderness feel more manageable for a moment. But they are temporary. They do not lead to abundant life. In fact, they often leave us needing yet another shortcut. Eventually, we discover that they do not lead us out of the wilderness — they only leave us more lost within it.

Like the Israelites, we can wander for years when we refuse to trust the road God has set before us.

The devil offers relief. God offers life.

Relief feels urgent. When we are hungry, we want bread. When we are hurting, we just want the pain to stop. When we are afraid, we want something we can control. And none of that is wrong. It's human.

But relief is not the same thing as healing – one is temporary and one is lasting.

Jesus could have turned stones into bread. He could have jumped from the temple. He could have taken the kingdoms. But he knew that would only delay the inevitable.

This fallen world can only find redemption on the other side of the cross.

And so, he remains hungry. He stays vulnerable. He commits to the long way home.

In Jesus, God does not escape our humanity. He joins us in it and takes us all the way to the cross and beyond.

Lent invites us to do something similar. Not to pretend we are strong. Not to prove ourselves. But to sit honestly with our weakness. To name it. To bring it before God instead of trying to fix it on our own.

Contrary to what you might think, the wilderness is not a place where God abandons us. In fact, the wilderness is where God forms us best. And that is what Lent is all about being formed by God in the wilderness.

And here is the good news. We don't have to make the journey alone. Christ has already walked this road.

He has faced the hunger. He has endured the cross. He has gone through death itself. And because he has, even the barren places of our lives are not beyond redemption.

The One who went through it all now carries us home.

Amen.