

Lent 1

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When you visit St. Catherine's monastery at the base of Mt. Sinai in the Egyptian wilderness, you are struck by the utter isolation of the community. In fact, the whole of the Sinai Peninsula is mostly wide open space, wilderness with mostly Bedouin communities scattered here and there—a nomadic people well adapted to desert living. It can be beautiful on the Sinai peninsula, but one has to be able to see its beauty in the starkness of the landscape. Traveling through there is only wide open spaces to see: scraggy plants, rock formations, sand everywhere. It is otherwise empty: no billboards, no buildings of any kind except in the occasional town, no fences, nothing that would indicate that the land was anything other than how it always was: wild and raw. I found myself surprised when I would see people in that wilderness; it just didn't seem like a place suitable for people to live, even thrive, and yet there they were. And here I was, at the monastery which had been there in that valley, with its faithful members, for 1500 years. And what is more, when you look up to the surrounding hills and cliffs, you can see caves cut into the rock as old or older than the monastery. These were dwelling places where desert fathers and mothers retreated to, away from the world pursuing a faith even more extreme than of those within the monastery's walls in order to find God. Here they would avoid the distractions and temptations of every day life, they would limit food, sleep, worldly pleasures, anything that got in the way of their experiencing God's presence. This desert, it seems is a holy place.

Christine Valters Painter writes that “[m]any monks, when founding monasteries, created what are known as “diserts” or “dysarts,” rooted in the idea of desert” and quoting the author of the book *Border Lands*, David Adam describes them as places “of retreat...set up to discover the edge of glory, to experience the beyond

that is in our midst. “Deserts” are set up not to run away from what is going on, but to experience in greater depth the reality that is about them.” She goes on to say that these deserts are threshold places, places of stillness and silence where what is real can be experienced.¹ Where what is real waits for us. Powerful space isn’t it? But not easy. Because, as you know, wherever you go, there you are and in the stillness there also remains our own demons, temptations, fears, and compulsions.

Jesus is in this very place in our gospel today. Having just been baptized by John, the Spirit leads Jesus into the wilderness. And for Jesus, it is indeed a threshold place, it is here Jesus must pass before beginning his earthly ministry, a place where he leaves behind the life he had known and enters into his calling as Messiah, just as it was in the wilderness that Israel wandered and became fully themselves as known by God before entering the promised land after being brought out of Egypt. The wilderness is a place of prophets, purification, and beginnings. And yet, in the ancient world, demons were thought to dwell in the wilderness and so by no means was the wilderness safe or comfortable. For it is here Jesus faces the accuser, Satan, who presents a choice to Jesus: choose those worldly comforts that are oh so seductive and familiar: a full belly, security, power or forego these things for what? Hunger? Risk? The emptiness of the desert?

First of all, these offerings of Satan are built on a lie. They are not Satan’s to give, not his to offer, none of it is real. The kingdoms of the earth, do they ultimately belong to him or to God? Will filling one’s stomach really be enough? Will satiety in our physical selves be enough to fill the needs of our soul? Satan is even so smooth as to quote scripture, to throw a veneer of legitimacy over his lies all to

¹ Christine Valters Paintner. *The Soul of a Pilgrim: Eight Practices for the Journey Within*. Sorin Books, Notre Dame, IN. 2015 pg. 55-56.

temp Jesus into turning away from his work of submitting to the work of the wilderness.

This is the opportunity Lent offers us, a space we create where we can do this work of the wilderness, to wrestle with the things that get in the way of our relationship with God. To face our temptations, be them little or great, to embrace stillness and silence and set those things which are not essential aside. Lent is our threshold space as well. We must pass through here in order to be prepared for what comes; it is through this struggle that we make ourselves worthy and able to wash the feet of our neighbor, and allow our own to be washed, where we can sit down with one another and break bread as brothers and sisters living into Jesus commandment that we love one another. It is here we prepare ourselves to face the cross learning to see ourselves as being both responsible for the violence on it and taking steps to leave the raging crowd behind and join Jesus on it. And of course, it is a time for us to prepare ourselves for the season of resurrection, the season of life where all is new and where we can let the newness that is taking root in us meet God in bringing forth this utterly new thing and not allowing fear to hold us back.

What the wilderness offers is the opportunity to let ourselves fully trust in God, to let go of the false security of the world and step into a reality that is deeper, ultimate, eternal, intimate involving our deepest selves not simply our physical bodies. It is meant to be transformative and pull us further into love, real love.

Professor Roberta Bondi writes about these early monastic mothers and fathers and the reason they sought out the desert saying:

God has come to us and still comes to us in Jesus to overcome our fears, to break the hold of our destructive ways of being have over us, and to restore our wounded and distorted humanness if we want it and are willing to seek it. This was the very

purpose of the incarnation: We are shown the way back to the original image of God in which we were created and enabled to become really loving, truly human.²

It is this desire to be true and truly loving humans as made in the image of God, she writes, that brought so many to the emptiness of the desert. Because there, they found everything.

And so as we find ourselves at the beginning of our Lenten season, may we surrender to the work of the wilderness, letting go of everything that keeps us imprisoned in falsehood and look for what is real trusting that even while we walk in such a fraught space, we know that we are not alone on our journey even when it may feel like that is very much the case. For the wilderness, the desert, the frightening places in our own souls are not meant to be avoided but embraced and explored. Because all that is belongs to God, and all that we need rests in God, food for our souls, eternal life, all of the kingdoms of the world, ourselves, and even the wilderness. So the season of Lent with its starkness and hunger is not meant as a punishment, it is a gift to bring us further into love by drawing us closer to God. Amen.

² Roberta Bondi. *To Love as God Loves*. Fortress Press. Philadelphia. 1987. Pg. 20