

Sermon: Sunday, March 6, 2022 – Lent I – Luke 4: 1-13
Ralph Connor Memorial United Church, Canmore AB – Rev Greg Wooley

As many of you will recall, three years ago – at this time of year – I was on sabbatical. There are lots of “how to” guides on planning a ministry sabbatical, which I found somewhat helpful about 18 months prior to the time, but once it got closer I needed different, more personal guidance.

Melissa Bane Sevier is a Christian Minister, photographer and blogger, whose “contemplative viewfinder” commentary on the Sunday lectionary I have enjoyed for many years. Just as my sabbatical was starting, I stumbled across a book she had written and I thought, “oh, Melissa’s written a book and here I am with time to do some reading. I should read her book. I wonder what it’s about?”

As it turns out, her book, entitled *Journeying toward Renewal* was about... taking a sabbatical! Her book included some excellent pointers but for the most part it wasn’t a “how to” book; instead, it was the story of *her* sabbatical in the year 2001. She wrote about her goals and hopes, the adaptations she needed to make, and confessed how hard it was to let go. In a particularly visceral chapter, she wrote about how challenging it was to have the events of 9/11 unfold right in the midst of that sabbath time, and how much faith and trust it took to stay the course and let someone else guide her congregation through that. There are very few “shoulds” in this book but a whole lot of honest narrative about her experience. In recounting her story, her emotions, her journey with God, she shared with me a faithful and sensible framework for determining my course of action. And yes, I was able to drop her a note to thank her.

I am so thankful for stories honestly told, for they help me find my way. At the beginning of the season of Lent, in a year when the eyes of the world are on the unfolding invasion of Ukraine, there are two narratives from scripture that may well play this role for us, honestly recounting God-involved journeys through bleak, endless, difficult landscapes.

One of those narratives, we heard this morning: Luke 4, the temptation of Jesus in the wilderness. Once Jesus goes through the ritual rebirth of baptism and hears himself audibly claimed by God, Jesus is filled with the Holy Spirit, and led by the Spirit into the testing grounds of the Judean wilderness. In this rugged, parched, unforgiving place, notorious for the concealed threats of wild animals and thieves, simply surviving would be a challenge. It was a time of fasting, and a time to revisit and resolve anything in his life that needed a second look before embarking on a new journey, all the while having his head on a swivel to deal with constant threat. And in dramatic form, Luke tells us that in these 40 days – a holy number of days with strong echoes from the faith history of the people of Israel - Jesus is confronted by the types of temptations that could be present for someone in his position and in his present state of exhaustion. The power of evil, personified in this story as The Devil, makes Jesus some very attractive offers of power: ways and means to satisfy his hunger, to have ultimate worldly power, to demonstrate the saving power of God. Particularly noteworthy, I think, in the context of what is happening right now in Europe, is the second temptation (Luke 4:5-7): “⁵ The devil led him up to a high place and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. ⁶ And he said to him, ‘I will give you all their authority and splendor; it has been given to me, and I can give it to anyone I want to. ⁷ If you worship me, it will all be yours.’” Two thousand years ago Luke understood that Satan had all the resources needed to satisfy a lust for expansionist power, and I would argue that Satan still does.

Exhausted, famished, battered by the elements, Jesus reaches beyond his own strength, to the strength of those who have gone before, finding answers to each temptation with words from the book of Deuteronomy (8:3, 6:13 and 6:16). Even when the tempter tries to cleverly twist the words of the 91st Psalm, Jesus finds the support he needs from an extended family of faith not limited by time or space.

If we hear this story of Jesus in the badlands, not as some far-off legend or as a simplistic moral tale, what can it offer us in the desolate wilderness spaces of March 2022? Finally released by the media's convoy fascination, we find ourselves confronted by the terrible realities of Ukraine. We see images of decimation, displacement, and rugged determination to dig in and resist. We wonder where, in the midst of all this, might God be found?? That is not a question to be answered quickly or glibly, but if I enter into the story of Jesus in the wilderness, being battered and threatened and brought to the very edge of existence, I see God's own endurance and desire to find life. By reaching into the wealth of his people's story to find wisdom and strength to get past his present circumstances, Jesus is recharged with life that endures. I see that happening right now, as the world responds to the plight of the Ukrainian people. The images of war reach out to us and not only the 1.3 million people living in Canada of Ukrainian descent, but so many people in this land with no blood connection are personally drawn to what is happening... and that is happening in nation after nation. God is not some far-off, safely-removed deity, accessible only to the devout through secret spiritual channels, but is experienced in the world right now as a force expressed by human hearts, the desire for dignity and justice and agency. And I think it is safe to say that all local refugee groups across Canada are keeping a close eye on this situation to see if there are opportunities to help in personal and tangible ways.

The other narrative – not read this morning but integrally connected to the season of Lent - is the story of the Israelites wandering in the wilderness for forty years (there's that sacred number 40 again) after their deliverance from servitude. American Rabbi Corey Helfand writes this: "Contemporary Bible scholar Avivah Zornberg points to very real challenges with journeying: anxiety, uncertainty. The Exodus from Egypt is laden with a fear of the unknown, and it seems that God was worried that once the Israelites saw the challenges that would arise while wandering in the desert, they would prefer to return to Egypt, where, although enslaved, they at least felt a certain degree of consistency in their lives, a familiar routine.

"This is a struggle that many people face at least one time or another in life" continues Rabbi Corey, "a reluctance to try something new, to veer off into uncharted territory, to stray from our comfort zones, all at the risk of traveling a path that is less familiar or comfortable."

"As we learn in the Babylonian Talmud" he writes, "'There is a long way which is short and a short way which is long' (Tractate Eruvin 53b). The journey of the Jewish people through the wilderness from slavery to freedom is undoubtedly filled with trials and tribulations, yet ultimately, through our circuitous route, we become...stronger from our experiences, more mature through our overcoming adversity and eventually, more assured that leaving Egypt was in fact the right thing to do".

And again: as we hear this story being told, what might it say to our experiences in March of 2022? As we imagine a people on the move for some forty years, we imagine what it might have been at year 3, or year 17, or year 39... would any of those or all of those felt like times when a new day was coming soon?

In a strange way, I find the story of the Israelites' wilderness wandering uplifting in my own bewilderment as I emerge out of COVID hibernation, doing simple tasks like moving my office out of my home, and back to the Church. Knowing that these ancient forebears in faith had years of imbalance and confusion about what to do, helps me put one foot in front of the other even when it feels like I am walking into fog. I think of the stressed-out Hebrew voices in the wilderness, almost immediately wanting to go back to the familiar safety of the place they had just escaped from, and it helps me to face up to a desire that lives deep within me, which wants the ease of having things to be as they were before the pandemic. I know that this is neither possible nor faithful, for God's direction is onward, not backward, yet I also know how jarring it is to be in a constant state of flux. And yes, the moment I look too closely at the unsettledness I experience these days, my field of vision is recoloured blue and yellow, and I am reminded of those who are under fire – and those needing to find safe passage to another land – and those choosing for the first time in their lives, to take up arms – and the terrible pressures faced by *all* of the refugees and displaced persons in our world, including five with whom we have special connections, in Nepal and Malaysia. Near the beginning of the pandemic, I bumped into one of our Syrian friends on the streets of Canmore and asked how things were going. "It's different, and hard" came the reply, "but I have lived through worse" ... and that kind of sums it up.

In our faith lives, we hear the big narratives of deliverance from Egypt into a time of wandering, and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit in Jesus leading him to hard testing, and they remind us of the resilience in our spiritual DNA. We listen to one another and we hear contemporary heartfelt, first-person stories – and through them we find new ways to interpret our lives. We hear stories describing a narrative with God, and it helps our stories find connection and context, points of shared experience and divergences that help us perceive things from other angles. And as we seek how and where God is present in these stories, in your story, in my story, even in days when there is so much threat and pain and violence in our consciousness, we find reason to hope that the domineering agenda of evil will not claim victory.

As we acknowledge the struggles of life – as our hearts continue to be moved by the first peoples of this land and their pain, as we hear of further gravesite explorations and discoveries – as our attention and compassion is utterly grasped by the happenings in Eastern Europe – as we deal with the hardest things in our lives - we enter into this season of testing and holy presence. May we know the presence of God to be real amidst all of this. Amen.

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<https://youtu.be/kcilq1ojZ5g>