

Sermon for the First Sunday in Lent | 2017

By Fr. Hayden A. Butler

Lectionary Readings:

Isaiah 58; Matthew 4:1-11; II Corinthians 6:1-10

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East of Jerusalem on the road to Jericho and the Dead Sea lies the desolate Judean wilderness. The warm Mediterranean air flows this way, but lingers in the rolling hilltops to the west, dropping its moisture before pouring down into this narrow rain shadow, a thin strip of land parched by dry winds. You can find water here, but you must go down to get it. Steep canyons drop into the earth, and to find refreshment you would have to descend, and the way is perilous. If you came this way in springtime, the sparse seasonal dew gives way to stubbly grasses. It is good for grazing sheep, but never enough to satisfy their hunger. And if you wait too long, the heat of the day is withering. On the other side, should you make it through, you'd find the Jordan River Valley, green and full of life again, a place to rest. This is the wilderness. This is the land between lands. This is barren land the likes of which God brought dew and life at the Creation. This is the land of Isaiah's vision, where the grass and flowers grow and the grass and flowers fade. This is the land where the scapegoats went to die on the great Day of Atonement. This is the land of John the Baptist, subsisting on locusts and preaching repentance. This is the land where we find Jesus, walking from the Jordan where He was baptized toward Jerusalem where He would be crucified.

For St. Matthew, the act of fasting in the wilderness is heavy with history, ripe with meaning. The wilderness is a place of preparation, a place for intercession, a place to wait on God, and a place to rest from your labors. After crossing the waters of the Red Sea, God led Moses and the people into the wilderness to the mountain, where Moses fasted for forty days and forty nights prior to receiving the tablets of the law. After the profound experiences of Passover and the miraculous bread from heaven, the wilderness is where the Israelites grumbled of food, provoked God's patience, and fell into idolatry. After the Israelites sinned, Moses went up the mountain again and fasted forty days and forty nights to intercede between God and the people, after which God relented from His anger. Later, King David fled to the wilderness to fast and wait on God for deliverance after his lapse into adultery and while his own son hunted him in open rebellion. Finally, Elijah fled for his life to the wilderness after shattering the religion of Baal, where he fell to the ground in a refusal of his calling, and yet where he was comforted, sustained, and renewed before he also undertook a forty day fast on the road to meet with God.

The wilderness is where the identity of God's people is revealed, and it is for this reason that Jesus chooses the wilderness as the setting for his battle with the devil. He becomes an icon for all of God's people, taking on his shoulders their history and their destiny. But where the people

of Israel had failed their own wilderness test, where even Moses, David, and Elijah faltered in their own callings through disobedience, infidelity, or exhaustion, Jesus proves his obedience, faithfulness, and strength. His victory over the devil was a victory to fulfill Israel's calling through perfect faithfulness to the word of God.

But the fight here is even more profound, because these temptations are not only the temptations of a tempestuous people in the Ancient Near East. They are, rather, the temptations of us all. We see them knotted together in the first temptations in Eden: the devil offers food, offers spectacle, offers power. St. John would later name these the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life. The Church names these temptations as the arch-enemies of the soul: the the flesh, the world, and the devil. Regardless of the names, the fight of Jesus shows Him to be the faithful Son of the Father, bringing the ancient covenant to its fruition, bringing relief and return to the exiled children of Adam and Eve.

The remembrance of Christ's victory in the wilderness comes to us this morning with a message of comfort and demand. We take comfort in the Gospel lesson because it makes clear that the best possible Lent has already been observed. Christ's fasting and conquest over temptation is more complete than we could imagine. If there had been a fuller way to be tempted, a fuller way to overcome, Jesus would have done it. In his victory, Jesus shows us that endurance of temptation and hardship is a necessary part of carrying out our calling as Christians. That the temptation is set between the Jordan and Jerusalem underscores that between Baptism and Death is the trial of the wilderness. The Lent of Jesus is a gift to us, because it teaches us faithful obedience to God, consistent reliance on the word of God, surrender to the plan of God despite the allure and apparent easiness of other callings. But the Lent of Jesus is even more a gift to us because it reorients our own practices of Lent so that we see them as proceeding from His own perfect practice. But the Gospel is also a demand to us today, because Christ's Lenten obedience is the standard for our obedience, the strong humanity into which we are called. Our faithfulness needs to become His faithfulness, and our call to progress is not complete until we get there. Comfort, and demand.

Easter is a gift, not a reward. Easter will come, not because we conducted a thorough or perfect enough Lent to earn it. This is good news, because even three days into the fast we might be feeling our resolve falter, we may have already lapsed or relaxed or felt the powerful and perhaps even embarrassing pulls of pleasures or temptations on our devotion. We might be going through the motions or decided that we're not participating this year. We might feel weak, or we might not feel anything at all. If so, we have the faithfulness of Jesus in the wilderness to consider. The best Lent has already been performed, with total obedience and self-giving, by the only one who has never needed Lent. His Lent is an example and an invitation. His Lent demands our response. But, again, the good news is that Easter is a gift because Lent is a gift. Jesus gives us

His Lent along with His Easter when He takes our lives into His and infuses His life in us. Today, as we commune with Him in the Eucharist, we accept the gift of a perfect Lent to make our fledgling lents more whole. And as our fast becomes His fast, so our wilderness time becomes His wilderness time, our denials of self and gifts of self become like His, our sufferings become His Passion, our deaths become His Death, and then, at the last, His resurrection becomes our resurrection.

The gift of Easter begins today with the gift of Lent, and it is already closer now than when we first began. “Behold, now is the acceptable time. Behold, now is the day of salvation.”

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