

Lent 1: Humanity fully Loved: Presence and Prayer

Texts: Mark 1: 9-15

Rev. Sharon Smith

Mark 1:9-15

1:9 In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan.

1:10 And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him.

1:11 And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

1:12 And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness.

1:13 He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him.

1:14 Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God,

1:15 and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news."

Introduction:

Every fairy tale or fantasy story invites us into unexplored terrain.

Little Red Riding Hood waves goodbye to her mother at the garden gate,

In the Princess Bride (Buttercup and Wesley enter the Fire Swamp), In the Lord of the Rings, Merry and Pippin (hobbits in the Lord of the Rings), enter Fangorn Forest – the mysterious place of the talking trees.

These wilderness places are symbols of vast voyages punctuated with the joys and dangers of the psyche, steeped in ancient myth and legend and infused with spiritual meaning.

Author and Journalist Justine Gaunt writes: "As the ancients dreamed up those stories and even when the oral traditions were finally written down in the middle ages and later, the lands of northern and western Europe were thick with woodland. The dangers were palpable: from

rogues and bandits lying in wait for unsuspecting travellers to opportunistic wolves hungry for the kill.”

And in modern times psychoanalyst Carl Jung, maintains that these dangers of the wilderness symbolise the terrifying aspects of the unconscious: its tendency to devour or obscure reason.

Yet sometimes these wilderness places or forests can become places of refuge:

In legends such as Robin Hood, the forest becomes a hiding place, a sanctuary. The forest provides refuge.

And metaphorically when we have lost the framework or the bigger picture which gave structure to our past life and a way forward –

We are invited to find our way to become ourselves,

Entering this wilderness we may succeed in finding our way out where we shall emerge with a much more highly developed humanity, one where we realize that even when we feel lost, we are fully accompanied – **and we are beloved.**

Content from a beautiful article written by: Justine Gaunt in 2011
(She is a writer and journalist and co-director with Simone Wood of *Apply Ever After Publishing*, a small publishing company producing fairytale apps for iPhone and iPad.)

<https://www.woodlands.co.uk/blog/flora-and-fauna/the-fairytale-forest---a-source-of-symbolism/>

We read today, that following Jesus’ baptism, following his inner understanding that he was so fully loved, the Spirit leads Jesus out into the Wilderness.

In the Hebrew Bible we read of stories that highlight the desert as a dangerous place. Sometimes those dangers are not outside of us but inside of us.

This is a time of testing.

It’s as if the very understanding of Love is put to the test.
By experiencing what it means to be human.

Interestingly Mark tells us nothing of the three temptations laid out in Matthew and Luke.

We are told only that there are wild beasts and angels.

I often think of humanity as God's experiment:

- A creature fully animal with all our passions, instincts and desires.
- With a spirit that communes and seeks union with the Divine, with the Spirit, with things of God.

These desires and instincts are powerful. They have in them the energy of creativity and have the force to be destructive.

We have all experienced sexual energy that can become so all-consuming and self-seeking – looking for an outlet no matter what the cost to others or ourselves.

And we have experienced desire as intimacy, respectful love.

It is because of this potency that humanity have been through the centuries sought to create fences around our desires and instincts.

This was the first understanding of Sin – not as moral failure but as an instinct that needed ordering.

This is wisdom of the desert teachers of the 4th and 5th centuries.

In the deserts of Egypt, Syria, Palestine and Arabia, a powerful movement happened. It was the beginning of Christian monasticism. People felt a calling to leave their known world.

The center of the movement was in Egypt - and it was a time of experimenting with the solitary life of the hermit and with other communal form of monasticism.

These spiritual seekers have come to be known as the desert mothers and fathers.

And they withdrew with an intention: they left “a society where the misuse of human relationships, power and material possessions” were opposed to “their sense of the sacredness of life”.

Their journey into the desert was to cultivate an awareness of God's presence.

- to experience God in each moment
- to commit themselves to the discipline of regular prayer and self inquiry.

For:

Until a person is present they cannot pray.

Once a person is present they must pray.

Anna Synclitica was one of these women who journeyed to the desert in the 5th century.
(380 – 460 AD)

A women who came from wealth and education.

She like many women in that time was able to reject the patriarchal constraints and restrictions by leaving society and finding a life-giving alternative in the desert

In her words Amma Synclitica encourages us to do the hard work of facing ourselves in solitude.

To remove ourselves from all that distracts and in her words “to do battle with our thoughts”.

Sometimes there are things within us that need to be:

- let go – pockets of guilt, shame, the voice of the self-critic (from the devil)
- embraced – our inner wounding – calling us to embrace our vulnerability and brokenness – to learn to integrate them with ourselves.

The Practice of “doing battle with our thoughts” may mean that we:

- Honour how we feel. We are made up of multiple selves/energies. They long to be welcomed in, in a radical act of inner hospitality.
- Attached to these feelings are the stories we tell ourselves. Some of these stories are not life-giving or healing.

From the Book: Illuminating the Way: Embracing the Wisdom of the Monks and Mystics
By Christine Valters Paintner

<https://abbeyofthearts.com/blog/2016/09/18/embrace-your-inner-warrior-with-the-desert-mothers-a-love-note-from-your-online-abbess/>

My invitation to you this Lent is to create a prayer corner in your home. Our homes are just as holy as church buildings.

Perhaps you could set up a place with an icon, a candle, a flower, the sayings of the desert mothers, stones, a cross, a rosary.

A place where you can be for a time each day and pay attention to both the feelings (sometimes really uncomfortable) and the thoughts associated with them. We may need to let go some of these slowly over time.

Knowing that you are fully accompanied and loved in that place

- where the beasts and the angels are.

For

Until we are present we cannot pray.

Once we are present we must pray.

May you have courage in this wilderness time of Lent – and may the Spirit lead you into Presence where there is much Grace. Amen.