

Yr. A, Lent 1
February 10, 2008
Preached by Furman Buchanan
St. Martins in the Fields
1656 words

Lessons:

Psalm 146
Isaiah 35:4-7a
James 1:17-27
Mark 7:31-37

Come Holy Spirit, and lead *us* into the wilderness...where we have a chance to discover our own deepest hunger.

There are two shocking realities that bind together the beginning of Adam's faith story with the beginning of Jesus' faith story: wilderness and hunger. These realities also define important aspects of *our* faith story.

Even though most of us live in relatively comfortable circumstances, deep down we know a thing or two about the wilderness. Our bodies are moving about in the pleasant environs of Forest Acres, but our hearts are living with the fear of uncertainty that is always a part of the wilderness. War, a shaky economy, illness, death, broken relationships, loneliness—these describe a few of the wilderness landscapes that threaten us and tempt us to despair.

Most of us can recognize wilderness when we see it. What we rarely do is pause to recognize the hunger that it generates within us. For some reason—it is probably a deep part of our DNA programming for survival—we move as quickly as possible to satisfy our hunger. There is something deep in our bodies and souls that propels us toward resolving (and hence, denying) our own deep hunger. And the easiest way to deny your hunger is by devouring whatever or whoever is nearby and convenient.

The disobedience of Adam and Eve had nothing to do with some inherently evil fruit. After all, the writer of Genesis has just finished telling us that *everything* God created was good.

Their disobedience had more to do with an insatiable hunger to “be like God, knowing good and evil.” In other words, they had a hunger for God and godliness, but instead of acknowledging this hunger and using it productively to lead them into deeper relationship with their creator; they instead grabbed the nearest, most convenient shortcut they could find to satisfy it.

The tree and the fruit were not evil. Indeed, they are described as good and beautiful. What was evil and deadly was the pursuit of a cheap, convenient substitute to feed their deep hunger of a life-giving relationship the Creator of heaven and earth and all that is in it. I am speaking of the same Creator-God who, for some unfathomable reason, also has a deep hunger to be in relationship with *us*.

There is a word for cheap, convenient substitutes. It is called “idolatry,” and it is at the heart of all sin. The main thrust of the 10 Commandments is idolatry. I urge you to read them during this season of Lent using this “lens” in order to see more clearly how they apply to *you*. Here are a few examples, just to illustrate the point:

Thou shall have none other gods but me

Translation: I set you free from slavery, don't look for any cheap, convenient substitutes for the life-giving relationship I am already offering you.

Remember the Sabbath day, and keep it holy.

Translation: Don't look for another cheap, convenient substitute for the abundant and peaceful life that I have already shown you by my own example in creation.

Thou shall not murder.

Translation: Don't murder someone as a cheap, convenient substitute for sorting out the anger or conflict in your relationship.

Thou shall not bear false witness against thy neighbor.

Translation: Don't tell lies as a cheap, convenient substitute for the real truth.

Well, you get the picture.

Now, I want you to think about where were the Hebrews were when they received the 10 Commandments? The wilderness.

What did God see that they refused to even acknowledge? A deep, deep hunger, and an irresistible impulse toward filling it with cheap, convenient substitutes.

Ironically, before Moses could even get back down the mountain with the Ten Commandments, the Hebrews had already cooked up a golden calf—in other words, a cheap, convenient substitute for a real, life-giving, freedom-granting, relationship that they already had with the creator of heaven and earth—who for some unfathomable reason, hungers deeply for a relationship with us.

Neither forbidden fruit nor gold calves are idols for us, and yet we are just like Adam and Eve and those restless Hebrews in the wilderness. Listen carefully to what I am about to say... We don't make idols out of bad things or evil things. We fashion idols out of *good* things! And you know what, good things can remain good, so long as we don't substitute them for God.

However, once we choose something less than God to be our ultimate concern—no matter how good it is—then we have slipped into the age-old pattern of trying to fill our deep hunger for God with something that is less than God.

Eugene Peterson, the Presbyterian scholar most widely known for his paraphrase of Holy Scripture titled "The Message" defines idolatry this way: Idols are all those subtle but obsessive attempts to give us a god or a routine or a program *we* can handle or use.¹

This is where the wilderness—as threatening as it may seem—can prove helpful to us. You see, the wilderness strips away our normal routines and programs that we use to handle our lives, and it reveals our deep hunger that cannot be satisfied with cheap substitutes. Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann puts it this way: "The world for which you have been so carefully prepared is being taken away from you...by the grace of God."

¹ Eugene Peterson, *Living the Resurrection* (Colorado Springs, CO: Navpress, 2006), p. 42.

If your work is what feeds you (and many of us are gorging ourselves to death with an addiction to work), there's nothing quite like the Sabbath to lead you into the wilderness, helpless and still hungry, where you might get in touch with your utter dependence upon God's grace, a grace that you *cannot* earn.

If you try to mask your hunger with alcohol or food or narcotics or some other substance (and many of us have gone through a long line of placebos searching for something to satisfy us), there's nothing quite like an intervention by those who love you to lead you into the wilderness, helpless and still hungry, where you might get in touch with your true dependency upon the provision that only God can offer.

If you feed your hunger with anger—even righteous anger—toward others (and many of us satisfy ourselves by projecting indignation onto liberals, conservatives, Muslims, Jews, gays, illegal immigrants), then there's nothing like Jesus' stubborn refusal to exclude our enemies to lead you into the wilderness, helpless and still hungry, where you might get in touch with God's mercy for our sins, and not for ours only, but for the sins of the whole world.

If you distract yourself from hunger with luxury and entertainment (and we are all guilty in this culture of reckless devotion to expensive luxury and cheap entertainment), then there's nothing like the stubborn loneliness that comes from a lack of deep, genuine relationships to lead you into the wilderness, helpless and still hungry, where you might find that honest and loving relationships with God and our neighbor are the path to life.

We don't need a fancy Bible word like idolatry to explain what is going on. Frankly, I think that word is unhelpful because we are generally not capable of seeing our own idols and so we conveniently refer to someone else's forbidden fruit or golden calf.

Here's the explanation: we are all addicted to an entire range of cheap, convenient substitutes for God. Spiritually speaking, we are a bunch of starving people living in a fast food world of cheap, convenient substitutes at every turn. That is the bad news.

The good news is this: there is hope for us, and especially when we are willing to risk entering the wilderness of our lives and of our hearts and resist the temptation of filling—and over-filling—ourselves with what is convenient and nearby.

The call to us in this season of Lent is to follow Jesus into the wilderness and trust him to show us how to truly satisfy our deep, deep hunger. And here it is...

Jesus chose his relationship with the Father over bread, despite the fact that he was famished.

Jesus chose not to exploit his relationship with the Father, despite the chance for experiencing one seemingly harmless miracle.

Jesus chose to worship only the Father, despite the chance to do really good and helpful things for society as a powerful and—a good, benevolent—leader.

In other words, Jesus did not choose a cheaper, more convenient substitute for God. He chose communion—Holy Communion—with the Father.

And Jesus did more than that. He commanded us to continue this Holy Communion—with God and with one another—because he saw clearly while *he* was in the wilderness that we are not called to live in the wilderness alone. For some unfathomable reason, the creator of Heaven and earth is still dying to have communion with us—to have a relationship with us.

The same God who sought so desperately to have a relationship with Adam in the wilderness, with Abraham in the wilderness, with Moses and the Hebrews in the wilderness, this God refused to give up hope. And, eventually, the relationship sought by the Father was fully reciprocated and attained its perfection in Jesus. And then, Jesus did a truly incredible thing—he gifted it to us.

So now what? Well, we are called to “feed on him in our hearts, by faith and with thanksgiving.”² We are called into the wilderness, but with an awareness that we are not alone. And in this season, we are called to a fast from the routine, cheap and convenient substitutes and remain patient and still long enough to acknowledge that our own deep hunger is for God.

It is out of God’s very own Easter Life that we are fed. And, by God, we are fed abundantly. Therefore, let us keep the Feast.

² Eucharistic Prayer A, *Book of Common Prayer*, p. 365.