

Sermon Bytes – Tempted

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I want to begin today by taking a Desert sojourn with the poetry of Andrew King. His words are so evocative you can almost close your eyes and feel the sun blistering the earth:

DESERT LESSON

(Matthew 4: 1-11)

It is the empty time just before morning,
the light just beginning to touch the tops of the hills,
just beginning to palm the skins of desert stones.
First one stone and then another
begins to change colour as in slow grandeur
the sun lifts red-orange into the clear sky
First one stone and then another emerges from shadow,
small solitudes of darkness in the solitude of wilderness
in the emptiness of early morning.
Jesus lies awake, his cloak wrapped tight against the chill of the night
as he sits watching the stars fade in the spreading dawn.
Hunger gnaws at him like a dog chewing a bone.

Look at that stone, he thinks,
How like a loaf of bread this rock
How comforting such food would be. . .
Lifting his head in the direction of the Holy City, Jesus pictures
the sunrise on the rooftops of the Temple,
gleaming in the light flashing like wings of angels
He imagines his feet astride that proud building's pinnacle
and himself not weak but mighty, not hungry but full,
not vulnerable, . . .

The wind stirs - the scrub sighs
Jesus ponders cloudless skies – the long dead land - the passage of time,
the rise and fall of kingdoms, the tides of marching armies,
the endless quests for power that sweep up people and nations
like sands in a desert wind.
He imagines himself
at the head of a host of armoured thousands,
lands and nations to serve him like the Pharaohs', like David,
like Caesar ruling from Rome. . .

Jesus sighs- stands - stretches,
a solitary man - a hungry man

And yet he smiles – at the simple beauty of it all
He smiles again as he looks at the stones
No bread from them –
He sees beyond recognizing the faces of the hungry – the poor
the left behind
He has come to share their lot
Not today - He will not evade his frail humanity
or deny his utter mortality,
It is a mantle he has chosen

He will not seek the throne of a kingdom today,
for the lost and the lonely of the world cannot,
and he has come to share their burden.

Day rises - into its breath-taking fullness – blistering the wilderness

Saying, “Get away from me, Tempter – Diablo – Ha Satan,”
Jesus starts to walking – the desert at his back
towards – towards the company of creation –
Towards people - towards the towns and the cities
where his ministry of love will begin.

His feet leave prints in the dust

What a litany of evocative verses - painting pictures of Jesus 40 day sojourn in the desert. Every year as we enter the season of Lent, It coincides with the world around us preparing for March break, as people head to whatever oasis they can find. A chance to get away from the cold barrenness of the hidden season. Did you know that one of the twenty or so words for winter in the Inuit language can be translated as ‘days of the white desert’?

White desert –tropical oasis. Life seems to be bolding and underlining and highlighting in red ink the difference between the church and society around us. But actually the desert area that Jesus spent time in much more like the coulees of the Badlands of Alberta – the home of Dinosaur park - than the shifting desert sands of the Sahara.

Yes, our journey is different. But we can learn a lot about our faith if we take time to embrace our own Lenten journey, delving into the history of faith by reading the scriptures, focusing on our relationship with God by spending time in prayer. Learning about the heart of God by reaching out to help those around us. And yes, by Fasting.

Today most people scoff at the idea of giving up stuff for Lent. Stuff like chocolate, or beer, or desert, or bread. What’s the point? they say. In History up until about 100 years ago, Lent, although described as a personal pilgrimage of faith, was also about community survival. Because by the time you got to midwinter, food was beginning to run low. Meat was scarce and because you wanted the hens laying eggs and nesting

for chicks. So you would have another crop next year. And the cows were calving and the sheep lambing – well, you get the picture. The only thing that was in the pantry was whatever you had stored and pickled from the year before.

That was what Shrove Tuesday was all about. You used up the last bits of eggs and sugar – to clear out. To manage with only the bare necessities until Spring / Easter some 40 days later. Lent was away of survival.

When Jesus goes out into the desert, we are told that he was Spirit-led. Jesus heads to the desert to spend time with the tester.

You know that we have this image of the Devil as the evil one. The fellow in a red suit with pointy ears and a long tail and a pitchfork, who rules a land of hellfire? But in the lore of Jesus day the Devil had a couple of variations. In Hebrew – He was Ha Satan – the Satan - a grand inquisitor. A person who put one to the test.

In Greek she is - Dia bol – the one who literally ‘throws across’ - tossing barriers across the path, dams blocking the water flow. Dia-bol is the one who throws curves that disrupt. She offers a “devilish” attempt to obstruct, confuse, or accuse.

Jesus tests his call his vision alone in the quiet simplicity of the desert, where you have to pay attention to your body and your surroundings

The temptations of Jesus, as presented in Matthew’s gospel, are written for a church facing profound change, chaos, and loss. In such a situation, the temptations of the Christ are also the temptations of the church. Diabol is all too real.

First Temptation: Go ahead, make stones into bread! Seems simple enough. Notice that the diabol does not dispute who Jesus is, but simply raises the sly question, “if you are the Son of God...”. Does being the beloved of God change everything for us? If so, then whispers diabol, why shouldn’t we be given what we want, especially in times of fear. But, Church cannot avoid change and suffering. Church lives “by every word that comes from the mouth of God.” The living Word of God is our life and hope and strength.

Second Temptation: Make your test God’s test! Climb up to the pinnacle of things religious and then show off! Seek glory! Seek miracles! Escape the chaos and confusion, by scaling the ladder of pretension, and then jump into “glory”, assuming God will take care of you! Ouch, this one hurts. As we consider the pretence of faithfulness to God, Lent is a good time to be reminded of our own folly, the way we “test” God. And as we do so, we find that we are worshiping only ourselves and the adoration we temporarily receive from others.

“You shall not test the Lord your God.”

Third Temptation: Become General Manager of the Universe! It's easy! All we have to do is let diabol put asunder what God has brought together. In playing God the church is often led astray by the trappings of power and glory and thereby divorce ourselves from God .

CBC's Terry O'Riley, in his program THE AGE OF PERSUASION, talks about the art of advertising, which is the art of temptation. By the way – listen in sometime – we in the church can all learn a thing or two.

Anyway, at one point in time, advertisements used to boast of the quality of the product. Then, they would seek celebrity endorsements. Today, however, advertisements make a promise less about the quality of a product and more about an imagined lifestyle that owning the product can somehow provide. By owning this kind of car, or using this kind of wineglass, advertisers suggest, we will discover our identity and move closer to having a meaningful life.

On the face of it, such advertising sounds ludicrous – how can using a particular laptop or television enhance your sense of self-worth? Yet to people so starved for a sense of meaning and purpose, so disconnected from self and world and God, it seems like they have the answer. But in reality the only path through the human journey is the path of faith – in the first desert days of our Lenten journey. Jesus shows us the key to following the path of faith is by finding our identity in our relationship with God.