

Meeting Christ in Our Everyday Lives
In Wilderness Temptations
Deuteronomy 9 – 10, selected verses
Luke 4:1-13
The 1st Sunday in Lent

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Introduction to Scripture and series.

Today, on this first Sunday in Lent, we begin a series of sermons that focus on Christ's presence in our lives. Although we believe that discipleship requires us to follow Jesus on his path, it is often the case that Jesus doesn't wait for us to catch up. Instead, Christ comes to us, and meets us where we are. It is a part of the blessing of the Incarnation – not just that Jesus was born once a long time ago, but that he continues to be present in our lives today. In this series, as we follow the gospel lectionary readings for Lent, we will look for Christ's presence with us in a variety of everyday-places: today, in the wilderness times of weakness and temptation; then in our times of strength and self-sufficiency; then in our experiences of random suffering and tragedy; then in our times of responsibility and duty; and finally in our experiences of extravagant love. So today let us begin to look at the many places in our lives that we meet Christ ... or better said, the places where Christ comes to meet us, where we already are.

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We love to be strong. I suspect it's true of many places, but especially in this community, we feel a deep desire to be competent, to be successful, to be on top of things, to be in control. Strength is a virtue, the ancients knew, and there is nothing wrong with this aspiration; it is a key to leadership.

But the reality is that we *can't* always be strong. An illness hits, and we are rendered helpless. The economy shifts, and our gifts are no longer needed. We lose a loved one, and the grief engulfs us. We make some stupid, self-centered decision, and our marriage dissolves before our eyes. It's not always terrible things that make us vulnerable, either. Sometimes it's even a welcome change that sets us off-balance: such happy life-transitions as going off to college or starting a career or having a baby can leave us feeling profoundly uncertain and exposed. A thousand different forces drive us into fearsome dislocation: sin and error, human nature, outside forces, positive changes, they hurl us into the wilderness, into vulnerability and weakness, into places we would rather not visit. For those of us who are hard-

wired to be in control all the time – myself included – this is a singularly distressing place to be.

Yet it may be that very distress – that very lack of control – that makes our wilderness experiences so profoundly formative. Like the Chinese character that indicates both crisis and opportunity, the wilderness always generates life-changes. We never come out of the wilderness the same way we went into it. Those times of vulnerability and weakness, those desert times will always test us, and shape us. Always ... for better, or for worse.

Our Scripture lessons today offer two very different descriptions of formation in the wilderness: the experience of the people of Israel, and the experience of Jesus. First, Israel's experience as told in Deuteronomy. You know the story: the Israelites, our ancestors in faith, have been freed from slavery in Egypt after God rained plagues on Egypt. When Pharaoh finally lets God's people go, Moses leads them across the Red Sea as if on dry land, and Pharaoh's troops are routed. But the Israelites do not go straight into the Promised Land; instead they are led first into the desert, where they live as nomads for forty years. Yet they are never alone. When they hunger, God gives them manna and quail; when they thirst, God provides water from the rocks. Even when they murmur and grumble in protest – which is fairly frequent -- God graciously provides for them. Finally God gives them the greatest gift, one that they don't even know they need: the Ten Commandments, the law that will shape them from a wandering band into a settled, civilized, and faithful people.

But of course, the people fail miserably. While Moses is up on the mountain receiving the law of the Lord, the people decide to make themselves a golden calf to worship ... forgetting God's presence, and trusting in their own power.

Fast forward to Jesus' experience. In this case, it is God's own hand that leads Jesus into the desert; "the Spirit," scripture tells us, "drove Jesus into the wilderness." There, like all of us in our wilderness times, Jesus is vulnerable – in this case physically weakened, hungry and thirsty – and because he is vulnerable, he is subject to temptation. But he doesn't succumb. Why? Not because he is the Son of God – he never plays that trump card -- but because, unlike the Israelites, Jesus does two things: he recognizes his vulnerability to temptation, and he relies on God's power alone. Let's explore what that might mean for us, when we find ourselves in the wilderness times of our lives.

One of the gravest mistakes we make is to think we are invulnerable. Especially because we're used to having control over our lives, we're used to having extraordinary resources, we're used to enjoying self-determination, we're used to being in positions of leadership – because of all of these things, it is easy to forget how utterly human we are. So I find it immensely reassuring that Christ himself experienced vulnerability ... and if Christ did, then who am I to pretend I am invulnerable?

What Christ offers us is a different model to face our weakness. Instead of pretending we're strong when we're not, we're encouraged to acknowledge our vulnerability and be alert to the temptations that inevitably present themselves. Even marvelous changes raise the chances of temptation: one of the great delights of youth is falling in love for the first time. But as one of my dear friends learned through her own tragic experience, an unwanted pregnancy can happen in a heartbeat. Out of her own pain she warned me, "The time to decide whether you're having sex is not when you're sitting naked on the bed." How much more will we find temptation in the wilderness of a troubled marriage, when we feel lonely and misunderstood. It is not just sexual temptations that haunt us, either. One man I know, after his job was down-sized, found himself isolated and angry, and soothed himself by being on-line with cyber-"friends" for ten hours a day. And in the wilderness of my own grief some years ago, when I felt irrational, ugly, and out-of-control, I found myself lashing out at the very friends who tried to help me. How much easier it would have been if I had only let myself grieve fully and deeply; instead, because I "knew" about grief – I was a pastor, after all! – I fooled myself into thinking that somehow I was immune to all its struggles.

It is when we think we are impervious to temptation that we run into the greatest trouble. But Christ himself acknowledged his own hunger and thirst, recognized his own temptation, felt no disgrace in claiming human vulnerability. What a relief to know that we do not need to feel *ashamed*.

This is the first step Jesus leads us to take in the wilderness. And then he takes us on our second step: he shows us how to rely on God's strength alone. It's always amazed me that when he's tempted in the wilderness, Jesus does not rely on his own prodigious power to get himself through his trials. "If you are the Son of God," the devil taunts, and of course, Jesus *is* the Son of God, and could easily do any of the feats that Satan offers. But instead, each of the three times he is tempted,

he turns to God and his Word for strength: “one does not live on bread alone”; “worship the Lord your God, and him alone”; and “do not put the Lord your God to the test.” Jesus himself leans on the Word of God, the power of God, the presence of God for help; why on earth do we try to get through our trials by our own wits?

If thinking we’re invulnerable is our first grave mistake, then our second mistake is to try to white-knuckle our way through our difficulties, or to dig ourselves out of the holes we find ourselves in. When I think about the downfall of Richard Nixon or Bill Clinton, it wasn’t their vulnerability that was their undoing. It was how they handled it: Nixon pathologically spying, Clinton pathetically womanizing, and both of them digging themselves deeper by trying to cover their tracks. And when I think of the debacle of Enron, it wasn’t their weakened condition that felled them. It was their choice to try to save themselves through every means possible, even if it meant lying, cheating, and stealing to get it done. How often in our appropriate desire to be strong and self-sufficient do we ignore the signs that we are in over our heads? Ironically, one of the strongest moves we can make in those times is to acknowledge that we need help ... and to look for help in the sheltering arms of the Lord.

And here’s the thing: Christ is with us in the wilderness, even when we do not know it. We are never alone, even when we feel it desperately. We are never on our own, even when we’re at our weakest and most frightened. We are never left without comfort, for as the Scripture says, even then Christ’s Spirit intercedes for us, with sighs too deep for words.

One of my favorite writers, Anne Lamott, tells of her story in the wilderness. She had made the mistake of not recognizing her weakness, not acknowledging her vulnerability ... and she was paying a steep, steep price indeed. She found herself pregnant when she really didn’t want to be, by a man she had just met, who was married. She elected to have an abortion, and that night downed a lot of beer and some prescription codeine to dull the pain. She did the same thing the next night, and the next night, until all the pills were gone. On the seventh night, very drunk and just about to take a sleeping pill, she start hemorrhaging, but was so disgusted with herself she couldn’t bear to call anyone. She sobered up very quickly, and three hours later, the bleeding stopped. I’ll let her tell the rest of it in her own words:

“I got in bed, shaky and sad and too wild to have another drink or take a sleeping pill. I had a cigarette and turned off the light. After a while, as I lay there, I became aware of someone with me, hunkered down in the corner, and I just assumed it was [the spirit of] my father, whose presence I had felt over the years when I was frightened and alone. The feeling was so strong that I actually turned on the light for a moment to make sure no one was there – of course, there wasn’t. But after a while, in the dark again, I knew beyond any doubt that it was Jesus. I felt him as surely as I feel my dog lying nearby as I write this.

“And I was appalled. I thought about my life and my brilliant hilarious progressive friends, I thought about what everyone would think of me if I became a Christian, and it seemed an utterly impossible thing that simply could not be allowed to happen. I turned to the wall and said out loud, ‘I would rather die.’

“I felt him just sitting there on his haunches in the corner of my sleeping loft, watching me with patience and love, and I squinched my eyes shut, but that didn’t help because that’s not what I was seeing him with.

“Finally I fell asleep, and in the morning, he was gone.

“This experience spooked me badly, but I thought it was just an apparition, born of fear and self-loathing and booze and loss of blood. But then everywhere I went, I had the feeling that a little cat was following me, wanting me to reach down and pick it up, wanting me to open the door and let it in. But I knew what would happen: you let a cat in one time, give it a little milk, and then it stays forever. So I tried to keep one step ahead of it, slamming my houseboat door when I entered or left.

“And one week later, when I went back to church, I was so hungover that I couldn’t stand up for the songs, and this time I stayed for the sermon, which I just thought was so ridiculous, like someone trying to convince me of the existence of extraterrestrials, but the last song was so deep and raw and pure that I could not escape. It was as if the people were singing in between the notes, weeping and joyful at the same time, and I felt like their voices or *something* was rocking me in its bosom, holding me like a scared kid, and I opened up to that feeling – and it washed over me.

“I began to cry and left before the benediction, and I raced home and felt the little cat running along at my heels, and I walked down the dock past dozens of potted flowers, under a sky as blue as one of God’s own dreams, and I opened the door to my houseboat, and I stood there a minute, and then I hung my head and said, ‘[Hell with] it: I quit.’ I took a long deep breath and said out loud, ‘All

right. You can come in”” (Anne Lamott, *Traveling Mercies: Some Thoughts on Faith*. NY: Pantheon, 1999, pp. 48-50).

Our times in the wilderness: they will inevitably come. Sometimes we are hurled there by our own mistakes, our own weakness, our own idiotic decisions. Sometimes we are led there through deep grief, or loss, or illness, or pain. Sometimes we are even driven there through happy circumstances ... into unfamiliar territory that sets us up to be off-guard. We all find ourselves there, in the desert of life: vulnerable, tempted, and weakened.

But there is no shame in vulnerability, no disgrace in being weak. And there is comfort beyond measure to be found there in the Lord. And when we do ... when we meet the living Christ who hovers near us all the time ... we will never be the same ... and we will always, always be safe again. Amen.