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Tim Hughes

Sermon: Desert Wisdom

The Old Testament Lesson: Psalm 32

¹Happy are those whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered.

²Happy are those to whom the Lord imputes no iniquity, and in whose spirit there is no deceit.

³While I kept silence, my body wasted away through my groaning all day long.

⁴For day and night your hand was heavy upon me; my strength was dried up as by the heat of summer.

⁵Then I acknowledged my sin to you, and I did not hide my iniquity; I said, "I will confess my transgressions to the Lord," and you forgave the guilt of my sin.

⁶Therefore let all who are faithful offer prayer to you; at a time of distress, the rush of mighty waters shall not reach them.

⁷You are a hiding place for me; you preserve me from trouble; you surround me with glad cries of deliverance.

⁸I will instruct you and teach you the way you should go; I will counsel you with my eye upon you.

⁹Do not be like a horse or a mule, without understanding, whose temper must be curbed with bit and bridle, else it will not stay near you.

¹⁰Many are the torments of the wicked, but steadfast love surrounds those who trust in the Lord.

¹¹Be glad in the Lord and rejoice, O righteous, and shout for joy, all you upright in heart.

The New Testament Lesson (Preacher): Matthew 4:1-11

⁴Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. ²He fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished. ³The tempter came and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread." ⁴But he answered, "It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.'" ⁵Then the devil took him to the holy city and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, ⁶saying to him, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down; for it is written,

'He will command his angels concerning you,' and 'On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.'" ⁷Jesus said to him, "Again it is written, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'" ⁸Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor; ⁹and he said to him, "All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me."¹⁰Jesus said to him, "Away with you, Satan! for it is written, 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.'" ¹¹Then the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him.

Hear what the Spirit is saying to the Church.

Sermon: Desert Wisdom

This past spring, Perry and I got to visit the deserts of Palestine.

Not only did we take a shiny tourist bus through the security checkpoints, crossing the boundaries from Israel to Palestine, from Jerusalem into Bethlehem, but we also left our group on foot and walked a few blocks away from the Church of the Nativity, where we were picked up in a wreck of a Volvo by a friend of a friend, a couple of young Palestinian guys who promised to show us "the real Bethlehem."

There is plenty to say about that, of course, but for the moment I want to focus on our visit to a monastic community in the desert outside of town.

"You have to see this," said our friend Alber. "It's incredible." And it was incredible. He and his friend took us to a place called Mar Saba – a huge monastery that had been carved into the side of a sandstone cliff. It looked like something between a castle and a Bedouin village.



The monastery was founded in 483 by Cappadocian monks who left cities all over the Middle East to re-establish their relationship with God in the wilderness. Mar Saba is thought to be one of the oldest monasteries in the world in continuous use. There are about twenty monks who live there today.¹ The cavernous building has no electricity and Alber told us that the monks have been given special permission to carry rifles, strictly for self-defense against robbers in the desert.

I asked if we could go inside but our Palestinian friends just shrugged. "There is very little to see inside," they said. However, they did lead us down a steep, sharply curving path from the monastery down to the river below. Along the way, we passed caves in the cliffs. "Sometimes the monks sleep out here," Alber said as we passed. "Sometimes the monastery itself is too nice." I did enter one of the little caves.

¹ "My Night at Mar Saba," by Stefan Szepesi. Published at the Huffington Post on February 11, 2015. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/stefan-szepesi/my-night-at-mar-saba_b_6607988.html



There was nothing inside it but a few hollowed out shelves in the sandstone wall. One shelf was large enough to function as a bed. The other shelves were for Scripture and a few items. And that was it.



I just stood there by myself for a moment inside the cave, trying to imagine this life. I must confess that I could not do it.

This is a theme that repeats itself again and again in the Holy Land – sacred emptiness. The holiest place is the emptiest place.

Walking into the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, the building that marks the traditional site of the resurrection of Jesus, your first impression is architectural insanity of the building. It is an elaborate Frankenstein's monster of a church, as though cathedrals from every corner of the world collided in one space. Pilgrims from every country and denomination on the planet stream through its doors, only to find a throng of people waiting in line to enter the Sepulchre itself – the alleged tomb of Jesus Christ. It sits in the center of the basilica. It was – again, allegedly – at some point a cave in a mountainside. Over time, the mountain was chipped down to a shell of the cave and the church was constructed around it. Eventually the shell itself was lost too, until all that remained was empty space. That empty space was then encased in an elaborate box. Which now, hundreds of pilgrims are jockeying to enter. The essayist Richard Rodriguez says that it is like standing “inside the idea of the tomb of Christ.”²

I actually declined to pass through the box, given the long line and all the hoopla, but I did watch in amazement as someone was ejected from the line after trying to shove their way to the front. Fighting to be first into the emptiness.

Similarly, I was fascinated to learn that most Jews decline to walk the large plaza of the Temple Mount, the most sacred site in Judaism. The Temple Mount marks the location of the Temple, before it was destroyed in 70 CE. To walk the plaza, a tour guide explained to me, is to run the risk of crossing through the space formerly occupied by the Holy of Holies, the most sacred space in the Temple. Despite the fact that building is no longer there, Jews do not enter the plaza. Instead they line up to place their hands on the one remaining wall of the Temple. Touching a physical structure – the boundary line - in order to engage the sacred empty.

² Many of the insights about religion and deserts in this sermon come from Rodriguez's insightful essay, “Jerusalem and the Desert,” from *Darling: A Spiritual Autobiography*. Viking Books, 2013, pg. 27.

Rodriguez notes that all three of our major Abrahamic faiths – Judaism, Christianity, and Islam – were born in this desert. The word “desert” literally means “empty” – to *desert*, to abandon, to abdicate.³ There is surely something ironic in the fact that our monotheistic faiths – each of whom would say that there is one true God that we can truly know – all three of these faiths trace their heritage back to this barren, empty place.

We are perched on the edge of the season of Lent, a wilderness space in the liturgical calendar. “What *is* Lent really about?” someone asked at Bible Study this week. It is an excellent question. It is harder to talk about Lent than Advent. We are very familiar with the postures of anticipation – waiting for birthdays and promotions and college acceptance letters. During the season of Advent we await the expected child like we wait for anything. We are less familiar with the postures of penitence and purification. People have the vague idea that they should seem grim, or hungry, or just plain miserable. This sentiment doesn’t market well, nor is it particularly accurate. The truth, I think, is that Lent is about marinating in something like desert wisdom. But perhaps that is equally vague.

The actual text, today’s story, is more concrete.

When Jesus is “led by the Spirit into the wilderness,” he is embodying a theme that appears again and again in the Scriptures. His forty-day fast recalls forty days spent on Noah’s ark, rocking through the flood (Genesis 7). It references Elijah’s forty-day walk through the desert (1 Kings 19). And above all, it re-enacts the Israelite people’s forty-year sojourn in the Wilderness, the proving grounds between slavery and freedom (Exodus 12-40).

That particular journey was marked several notable failures. Failure to trust in God’s provision, and failure to obey God’s instructions. The patterns of provision, instruction, disobedience, repentance, and

³ Ibid, 49.

forgiveness become something of a metronome by which you can move through the Scriptures. But time and again the narrative returns to the desert.

In her book, *The Desert Fathers*, Helen Waddell says that a truly unique innovation of the desert mothers and fathers was the idea of *eternity*. To live a life in the desert, she writes, is to be acutely aware that your life will be difficult and that when you die, the desert will remain. On the other hand, to walk the desert landscape at night is to be astonished by the vast expanse of the sky, the abundance of the stars, the incredible number of things you neither know nor understand.

In other words, the spiritual gifts of the desert include both humility and wonder.

Our Palestinian guides didn't know much about Saint Sabbas, the founding monk of the monastery where we were exploring the perimeter. I had questions but they wanted to find a cleft of in the canyon wall where they could smoke cigarettes in peace. Fine. I craned my neck up towards its towers, imagining people fleeing the city in search of God's wisdom. They came under the conviction that the Gospel of Jesus Christ was being corrupted by many forces, but chief among them was the power of the Empire. Diocletian was the last Emperor to persecute Christians, snatching them from secret churches and throwing them into the Coliseum and the lion's den. But all of that came to an end in 303 CE, and just ten years later Constantine declared Christianity the religion of the Empire. After a dream, he ordered all Roman soldiers to emblazon their shields with the cross of Jesus Christ, declaring "in this sign you will conquer." To some Christians that may have seemed like great news but it was enough to send monks packing off into the desert, fleeing what they thought of as the poisoning of the faith.

And surely – *surely* – the desert mothers and fathers meditated on Matthew 4 and this protracted argument between Jesus and the Tempter. The word "devil" is so loaded that I prefer "tempter" or "tester." Regardless of how you feel about the devil, who here has not

engaged in extended negotiation with the voice inside your head? There isn't time here to examine each of the Tempter's offers at length, but I will note that they are not inherently evil.

"Use your power to take care of yourself," the Tempter says. It will not be long until Jesus takes two loaves of bread and multiplies them to feed a crowd (Matthew 14). But here Jesus says no.

"Trust God to keep you safe," the Tempter says. It will not be long before Jesus cries out from the cross to God, "Into your hands I commend my spirit," (Luke 23:46). But here he says no.

Finally, the Tempter offered Jesus authority over "all of the kingdoms of the world." It's more or less the offer of Constantine. And it will not be long before Jesus instructs his followers to go to the ends of the earth with his story (Acts 1:8). But here he says no.

The real temptation, it seems to me, was not the nourishment of bread but the illusion of *self-reliance*.

The real temptation was not the protection of God's angels but the illusion of *invincibility*.

The real temptation was not Jesus' sovereignty but the specter of his *dictatorship*.

In each case, the Tempter asked Jesus to exchange his desert wisdom, his holy emptiness, for some sort of construction that will provide certainty.

In each case Jesus recognizes the trap and steps to the side. I confess that I've always viewed Jesus' forty days in the wilderness as a serious disadvantage in this cosmic showdown. Negotiating bread with the devil after a forty day fast always seemed to me to be akin to attempting a swordfight with both hands tied behind your back.

But the testimony of the desert mothers and fathers suggests otherwise. What if Jesus' time in the wilderness was not a handicap but essential

preparation? A clearing of the cobwebs and constructions that always threaten to cloud his deepest purpose?

Here, I think, is where we find the church at its most counter-cultural. Here we discover a spiritual wisdom, a desert wisdom that is a desperately needed corrective to the narratives of American civic religion, which would tell us that the bread we earn for ourselves is our top priority and credential.

American civic religion which would say that ensuring safety for ourselves is of ultimate concern.

American civic religion which uses religious language and perhaps even Scripture to suggest that at the end of the day we kneel in worship not before the God of love but the gods of brutal power.

To each of these temptations, Jesus says a firm no. And I believe in doing so, he is informed by the wisdom of the wilderness.

He is informed by the harsh lessons of the desert that it is only by relinquishing our death grip on the things we think will save us that we become empty enough, available enough, to a God who has a track record of showing up in new and unexpected ways.

Here is where I am so grateful to be a part of a deep tradition, thousands of years old. Because so much of what passes for religion just fills us with smug certainty, sentimentality, and a false Gospel that implies that satisfying ourselves is the ultimate end of our lives.

That, friends, is akin to cramming ourselves into a recently constructed box meant to represent the idea of the place where Jesus rose from the grave. It's a trap.

We need the discipline and witness of a tradition that spans generations of pilgrims who can gently remind us that we are missing the point.

This Lent, I say embrace the empty places. Embrace God's silence. Fall quiet and open your arms. That to me is the heart of it. And guess what? You don't have to look so sad.

Because the emptiness is not an end unto itself. It might present as a lonely cave but ultimately it is a passage. The desert wisdom reminds us that in its season, emptiness is freedom *towards* what God is doing next. An availability towards what is coming – a love and justice we can scarcely imagine.

Our theme this Lent is "Call and Response." In using those words, we reference the sung call and response, which we'll use in a moment. But we are also focusing on dialogue – a holy back-and-forth between God and us, and between ourselves and our neighbor.

So in the spirit of that theme, Andrew and I will end each sermon this Lenten season, not with a statement, but with a question. Think of it as a tiny little desert – a place where God's spirit might show up.

I'm going to ask a couple of questions and then we'd like to ask you to sit with them for maybe 30-60 seconds, in silence. And then, we'd like you to share your thoughts with someone sitting around you. If the thought of talking with your neighbor fills you with dread, as it sometimes do me, don't do it! But we'd like to nudge you out of your comfort zone a little bit. You'll have about 5 minutes to discuss and then Andrew and I will end the conversations by singing the song the children learned earlier. When you hear us singing, we invite you to join in.

Here are today's questions.

As we begin the season of Lent, where are the places of emptiness that you are tempted to fill up with things like power, control, and safety?

Where are the places or relationships where you might be wise to clear a little space and see what happens?

And finally, if you want to go there, how do you hope that God might show up in that desert?