

Luke 4:1-13

Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, where for forty days he was tempted by the devil. He ate nothing at all during those days, and when they were over, he was famished. The devil said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread." Jesus answered him, "It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone.'" Then the devil led him up and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. And the devil said to him, "To you I will give their glory and all this authority; for it has been given over to me, and I give it to anyone I please. If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours." Jesus answered him, "It is written, 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.'" Then the devil took him to Jerusalem, and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here, for it is written, 'He will command his angels concerning you, to protect you,' and 'On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.'" Jesus answered him, "It is said, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'" When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time.

Stories from the Desert

About 5 years ago I found myself flipping through the TV stations one evening and landed on PBS. They were showing part 2 of a 7 part documentary on the Roosevelts. And much to my surprise, I was hooked after just 10 minutes. Ken Burns is a masterful storyteller. I had seen his documentary on the Lewis and Clark exhibition and having lived in Montana I loved every minute of it. I also thoroughly enjoyed his documentary on Baseball growing up an avid Houston Astros Fan. Go Stros! And a few years ago he covered the history of the National Parks. I fell in love so completely the first time I set foot in Yellowstone Park one winter that I am forever wondering why I live in central Texas while other people get to live there. Free childcare, my husband keeps telling me, referring to my parents who live in Austin as well.

Ken Burns tells great stories about topics I already love. But I'll be honest, a story about a rich family in politics around the turn of the 20th century is not on my list of things I'm passionate about. Or interested in. Not even a little bit. But Ken Burns is such a great storyteller I found myself telling Derek one night, "This is one of the best things I've ever seen!" So I recommend it if you like history. Or even if you don't.

I had done a biography report in the 8th grade on Eleanor Roosevelt so I had a rudimentary knowledge of her and her family...which is to say I knew she was the president's wife and was very outspoken on a lot of topics...but don't ask me which ones. But watching the documentary I came to realize what a force this woman was. Outspoken, tireless, determined. But the story that stayed with me was a trip she took during the 2nd World War to visit injured troops in the South Pacific. When asked about visiting the soldiers she said, "You must do the thing you think you cannot do."

How could this woman be afraid of anything? How could she feel insecure about anything? She seemed to be the very definition of strength under pressure. And yet here she was nervous about visiting men with horrific injuries, and facing their pain. Here she was admitting she struggled to meet the ravages of war head on without turning away from the horrors she saw there.

I keep coming back to that story. Of going to the places where human suffering is greatest, and acknowledging it, bearing witness to it. Even if there is little we can do about it. But being present with people in the midst of it. It is such a hard thing for us. For me.

I have trouble watching the news...shortly after my first child was born my tolerance for childhood suffering plummeted. I couldn't handle hearing about child abuse, childhood trauma, the myriad school shootings. Those children on tv weren't other people's children. That was my child suffering. I've met a number of people who work with children as court advocates, or

with victims of child abuse. And I always thank them profusely for doing the thing that I cannot do. For facing the suffering that I cannot face right now. I think of Eleanor Roosevelt visiting injured soldiers so far from their homes and their mothers...and have wondered if she saw in them her own children.

I've struggled with understanding what Lent is about. What we're supposed to do during Lent. What we're supposed to learn. Why would Jesus willingly go into the desert to fast and pray? And all the spiritual temptations he faced after 40 days of physical temptations. Why would any of us willingly go into the desert of Lent, and for what purpose?

I think there are as many answers to that question as there are people in the world. But the one I have pondered recently is this idea of "doing the thing we think we cannot do." Of pushing ourselves into the places we don't want to go. And seeing what we learn about ourselves. And what we learn about others who are already suffering there.

Lent isn't a holiday. We kind of got that holiday feeling for a brief moment last week with the story of the Transfiguration...right when Peter and James and John saw Jesus transformed before them and Moses and Elijah coming to talk with him. And Peter said what all of us probably feel when we have these amazing moments of epiphany and clarity "Why don't I build 3 dwellings, one for you and Moses and Elijah!" Or, "Why don't we stay up here so you can host a conference with the great prophets!" Or, "Why this is nice! Let's bask in this for a while!" Or, "It is good for us to be here all together!" I think if God hadn't interrupted him he probably would have broken out in song singing Kumbayah.

But Jesus doesn't stay up on the mountain. He takes them all back down into the valley because we don't get to stay up there. The time away is great. The clarity we get on why our work matters is immensely helpful. But that's not where we work. The work is down here, in the valley, in the desert, and that's where Jesus sends us back to work. Because that's where people are suffering. That's where evil lives.

Last weekend at presbytery meeting in Austin I attended a panel discussion led by people who have done work along the Mexico border. A group of pastors went down to work with several groups helping to provide basic supplies to people who had been processed at the border. One day they received 800 people and had to figure out where they were going, give them bus passes, diapers and children's clothes, signs that read "I don't speak English. Please help me find my bus." Groups like Catholic Charities and Angry Tias and Abuelas work every day, receiving thousands of people every week, handing out basic needs, taking in donations and sorting them, all volunteers. And the people keep coming.

The group of pastors showed up and there was no one there to tell them what to do, no training describing the order of things. It was just all hands on deck, everyone seeing what needed to be done: some of them sorted clothes, some translated, some handed out teddy bears a church in Canyon Lake had made. One pastor broke down when he described seeing immigrant children running around in his own children's clothes that he had donated. Another pastor recalled how they gave away hundreds of hand sewn teddy bears, and could have given away twice as many. All these children at this repurposed nursing home carrying the bears women in one Texas church had sewn for them. And the people kept coming. and the kids kept coming. and the workers just kept going each and every day.

There are many different approaches to Lent. Many different spiritual practices we can take on during Lent. One of my friends vowed to do 20 minutes of yoga every day, to provide rest for her brain, prayer for her spirit, and strength for her body. Many have taken this opportunity to renew their lapsed new year's resolutions to improve their health or their relationships. I've even heard of people vowing to throw out 40 bags of trash or accumulated stuff in 40 days. It's perhaps the Marie Kondo version of Lent...and one I admit I'm working on and struggling with.

But whatever your practice, I hope you dare to go into the desert with Jesus. Whether it be facing head-on the suffering you find among your colleagues. Or reading a book that challenges your understanding of a group of people who worship, look, or live differently than you do. Or sitting silently in hospital rooms with loved ones facing the dark abyss of a diagnosis. Hospitals are always deserts.

There's a lot we will find in these deserts. First, last, and always, we'll find Jesus there. suffering with us. Crying with us. facing evil with us. Jesus is always the one helping us find a way faithfully through the desert.

We'll also find plenty of opportunities to offer blessing in the desert. To bless and honor the work of those who are facing an uphill battle. To bless the people who have not been up that mountain and seen anything extraordinary like a transfigured Jesus in quite a while. Shining a light on the meaning of their work and showing them the presence of Christ in the desert is such a blessing to them.

The last 7 or so years my downtown Episcopal church has offered "Ashes to Go" on Ash Wednesday, taking the ritual and prayers to meet people on the street who might not come in our doors. I've taken a shift the past 4 years and have found it one of the most meaningful things I do each year. And one of the hardest as well. Evangelism has never been my strength. I struggle with the arrogance of assuming I know what a stranger needs and let me convince you that you want what I'm trying to sell you.

But evangelism doesn't have to be this way I've come to realize. But it does require I leave the confines of my church...as I did on Ash Wednesday dressed in full regalia of a black cassock and white billowing surplice on top. Even if you've never been to church you recognize this garb as church wear. So I walk from my parking place in downtown Austin to my appointed street corner in this garb to replace another member wearing the same thing, fully aware I look extremely out of place.

But that's the point of Ashes to Go. We go out to the people and offer blessings and ashes to people who cannot get to us. Lots of business men and women coming down on their lunch break because they saw us from their office building 6 stories up. Construction workers crossing the street from their work zone during a water break. Moms pushing strollers with babies and groceries. People driving past, pulling to the curb, and holding up traffic behind them just to receive a blessing and some ashes. And we do a short version of the already shortened version as we lean in the car window and place ash on their foreheads. We share a corner with homeless people, street musicians, and the hustle of people in the midst of a busy work day. And to a person, everyone thanks us for being there, because they couldn't get to church that night, but wanted that blessing. Wanted that encounter with a stranger who reminds them God is with us in the midst of our busyness.

People stop to talk, telling us stories of why they left church, how church rejected them, hurt them, why they can't go back. And we tell the God loves them, and apologize for the many ways we have gotten it wrong. And yet here we both are, a stranger feeling the need to be with us; we church people, needing to leave the confines of our church building for this conversation to happen.

One man didn't want to receive ashes, but he couldn't seem to leave. He told us church had turned him off to God, but he kept standing there, like he was trying to decide if he should tell us something. And you could almost see the inner turmoil the man felt, obviously longing for the blessing of church, but deeply cynical it could be any different from what he had experienced before. We gave him the card with the Ashes prayer on it, and church service times printed on the back. I hope he finds his way into a church, somewhere.

One woman came up silently, and I asked if she wanted to receive ashes and she just nodded. I prayed and placed the ashes on her forehead and noticed she was crying. I asked if she was ok. She nodded then said, "My

father died a year ago today." I said a prayer for her and her father, and the love they shared, and she left as silently as she came.

Never has anyone said to us "you shouldn't be here." No one has yelled at us. People come up and ask for ashes or they smile and keep walking. Maybe it's the religious garb we're wearing. Or the sandwich board that says "Ashes to Go" that clearly indicates what we're about. But each year I show up and am so completely humbled to be invited to bless strangers I meet.

Wherever your inward Lenten journey takes you, I do hope you turn outward. Take notice of who else is in the desert around you. I hope you challenge yourself to face the suffering you find there head on. So much of it we won't be able to solve. But someone walking beside you in the desert can work wonders in itself. The pastors who showed up at Catholic charities at the border didn't solve the border crisis. But they walked for a while with the overwhelmed immigrants they met there. They offered kindness, and compassion. And teddy bears. Never underestimate the power of a homemade teddy bear. I don't know if Eleanor Roosevelt solved any problems on her visit to injured soldiers. But never underestimate the power of another person acknowledging the hell you are going through. I didn't solve any problems on my street corner in front of Whole Foods last Wednesday.

But so many people didn't need their problems solved. They needed to hear God was with them in the midst of their problems. They needed their work blessed. They needed to be heard and seen, and valued. Most of all I think we all needed a moment of human kindness and connection. Someone speaking to us not through a text message or a facebook conversation, but flesh and blood, wrinkled smiles, human hands placing burned ashes onto wrinkled foreheads.

The power of Jesus lies not in his divinity, but in his humanity. He was flesh and blood like we are. He was hungry in the desert, like we are. He was tempted by evil just like we are. As we follow Christ into the desert, may we

find his footsteps leading us safely through. And may we be his hands and feet extending blessing to all those we find there struggling with us.

In the name of God our Creator, God our flesh and blood, and God our eternally-with-us Spirit. Amen.