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The Church of the Good Shepherd
The Second Sunday of Lent – March 16, 2025
Luke 13:31-35

We are in the desert now. In case you've missed the signs – the bare altar, the purple, the penitence of the Great Litany last Sunday, and the discipline of the Law a few minutes ago – we are now immersed in the season of Lent. Accompanying Jesus in his desert fasting and temptations, we spend the 40 days of Lent wandering this place of fierce landscapes: where distractions are stripped away; where everything is reduced to its essentials; and where we are left with only ourselves and God. The season of Lent provides us an opportunity for a course correction, so that we may remember...remember who we are; and remember that God is God and we are not.

Here in this Lenten desert, we are no longer afforded the delusion of living as if we are the center of the universe. Here, we are purged of the distractions that come with our culture of relative plenty and convenience. Here, we see our constructions of self and security for what they are.... mere constructions created by vulnerable creatures of God, dependent upon our Creator and interdependent with each other. Confronted with the truth of the very precarity of our mortal, fragile, broken lives, we are shaken.

It is a customary discipline in Lent to give something up for the season. The felt experience of absence or denial of satisfaction can help bring us to the present moment and give us an opportunity to willingly turn our attention away from self and toward the God of all Creation. This self-denying act then becomes an instrument of repentance – a signpost pointing us in a different direction to seek our fullness and joy. The good we seek in the season of Lent is a clearer understanding of who we are and who God is.

We should beware, however, because real dangers also abide in the desert. It is here that we, like Jesus, are tempted. Stripped of all non-essentials, the barren landscapes of the desert can bring the temptations and the desires of our hearts, minds, and bodies into sharp relief. The desert can bring a disconcerting clarity of vision to that which we prefer not to see within ourselves. But the truth of this vision can also allow for the grace of God's love and forgiveness to bring healing and wholeness.

I once had the pleasure of hearing the Rev. Philip Jackson of Trinity Church Wall Street preach. In his sermon, he used the philosopher Charles Taylor's imagery to frame the three arenas we may inhabit in our moral and ethical development: the corral, the fields, and the forest. We are first brought into the corral, where we are safely contained. In the corral, the abiding concern is "what should I do?" The focus is on acting in right ways in order to be a good person. While it is safe in the corral, it is also crowded – there are lots of distractions and focus is on each other. We spend much of our time jockeying for position and negotiating how we will be in relation to each other.

Moving out from the corral, we find ourselves in the fields. There is more space here; more room to breathe. Life in the fields is less bounded and that can be discomfiting and produce anxiety. In the fields, the question is not "what should I do?" but "who should I be?" This is a bit more like the mid-life crisis of "is this all there is? Is this really who I am to be?" In the fields we ask deep self-identity questions, focusing now on questions such as: what is my goal? Who am I called to be? What should be my best and highest expression of self? The concern here is more about human flourishing rather than rules of duty.

But beyond the fields lies another land... the forest. The forest is a wild place, full of possibility and risk. It is exciting in the forest but also dangerous, because it is uncharted and easy to lose one's way. It is often hard to find one's place, for perspective can easily be lost. The trees can hide the sun and stars; and it is easy to unknowingly walk in circles. We want a map, but we can't only rely on the ones we are given, for they are often misguided and can lead us into danger, so we must seek different signposts.

It is in the forest, however, where the greatest *potential* may be found. The forest is teeming with life and possibility, as well unknown threats. In the forest the abiding question is now “what commands my greatest love?” What is the one thing that is the real focus, the real purpose, of life – the real and true ground of my being?

This land is also known as the desert, of course. In the desert, all the usual signposts are gone. The rules of the corral don’t really work here. The seeking of the best self of the fields is necessary preparation for the desert but will not be enough to carry you through. In the desert, no one emerges unchanged and the way that one is able to traverse it is by brushing away rules and goals and holding fast to what lies beneath, behind, and before all of this: God’s love. In the desert, merely polishing the outside of our cups is not sufficient, we must attend to the cleansing of the inside. In the desert, we must focus our attention on our intentions and the state of our hearts, for this is what drives our thoughts and actions.

Last Sunday, we heard these words from the Book of Deuteronomy: ***A wandering Aramean was my ancestor.*** This assertion speaks to my heart because this is the truth of who we are – that, we are who we are because those before us journeyed the desert. And they now beckon us to follow.

In the lesson, we heard this (and I paraphrase):

When you come before the altar of the Lord your God, you shall confess: A wandering Aramean was my ancestor; he went down into Egypt and lived there as an alien... When the Egyptians treated us harshly and afflicted us... we cried to the Lord, the God of our ancestors; the Lord heard our voice and saw our affliction.... The Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm... And he brought us into this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey.

This is our story. This has always been our story. Abraham and Sarah, Jacob and his twelve sons, Moses and the liberated Israelites, the exiles in Babylon: time and again our ancestors wandered the desert. And, of course, Jesus journeyed the deepest into the desert. It is a perilous landscape – a place with the very real threat of death, as well as the place where God may be encountered most openly. A burning bush, a pillar of cloud, a high-desert mountain top theophany...it is in the desert where God speaks most clearly. The desert strips away the distractions and noise of the corral. The desert doesn’t give room for the pursuit of self-improvement. The desert lays all this bare and, in our wandering, we may find the truth - the truth that God is there and has been there all the time.

No longer afforded the luxury of distraction and self-delusion, in the desert we find that all that remains is God. The claim made in the book of revelations that God is the Alpha and the Omega, that makes sense here – God is, was, and will always be. Here, we now understand what it means when God gives his name to Moses as “I AM that I am” – and we understand that we are because God is.

A wandering Aramean was my ancestor. I invite you to meditate on this claim of identity. I invite you to try it on this Lent and explore how it fits – what might be uncomfortable? What makes you anxious? I believe this claim is not only an assertion of our heredity but also an invitation to join them. This Lent, may we strain our ears to hear the call of our wandering ancestors, and may we have the courage to follow them.

Amen.