

Matthew Dumont-Machowski
Grace Episcopal Church, Alexandria, VA

First Sunday in Lent, Year C

March 10, 2019

Deuteronomy 26:1-11

Psalms 91:1-2, 9-16

Romans 10:8b-13

Luke 4:1-13

“Filled with the Holy Spirit, Jesus left the Jordan and was led by the Spirit into the desert, for forty days being put to the test by the devil.” (Lk 4:1)

I speak to you in the name of the merciful and ever-living one God, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Walk Humbly with Your God

Desert is a truly unique place! Never quite the same, as the sand always shifts in quite some unpredictable ways. And for millennia, it has both frightened and fascinated the peoples of the Middle East and Africa.

It was indeed in the remote desert of El Natrun, close to the current Egyptian border with Algeria, that a group of 3rd-century Christian ascetics led by St Anthony the Great, gave rise to the first ever flourishing monastic movement, later known as the Desert Fathers and Mothers.

A collection of their oral tradition that two centuries later was recorded in the *Book of the Elders*, provides us with some fascinating accounts of the church's early ascetical and spiritual tradition. In one of the stories that we inherited from the Desert Fathers, we read of an encounter between one of the hermits and the evil spirits.

“What drives you out? Is it fasting?” he asked.

“Have you ever seen us hungry or with dry mouth?” – the evil spirits responded to his question perversely with another question.

“Surely, it must be the late-night vigils!” He exclaimed.

“We don't sleep!” – they calmly replied. – “We visit you both day and night.”

“Hermetic life? - he asked again, yet no longer so confident as before.

They replied: “The desert? Don't you know that after all, that's our main residence?”

“So, what is it that drives you out?”

“Only humility can defeat us”, the evil spirits unwillingly acknowledged and disappeared.

Humility is indeed the one Christ's virtue that beams throughout the Gospel reading today. So, on this First Sunday in Lent, at the beginning of this holy season, when we are yet again reminded of our mortality, sinfulness and utter dependence on God's grace, I ask that we render our hearts open, accept our limitations, and walk humbly with our God.

If we look closely at the words of the fourth chapter of the Gospel according to Luke, it becomes clear that there is no secret weapon here that Jesus would use against the devil. His humility that holds onto the truth of the revelation, just as firmly as we like to hold on the ground upon which we tread, must suffice. When tempted and tested by the devil, Jesus filled with the Holy Spirit responds humbly with the simple words of the Torah.

When offered bread, though famished, Jesus uses powerful words from Deuteronomy: "One does not live by bread alone." Likewise, when offered all the worldly dominions, he prayerfully repeats Deuteronomy again and says: "Worship the Lord your God and serve only him." And finally, when tempted to rely on God's angels to protect him, Jesus recalls the Mosaic law, "It is said, 'Do not put the Lord to the test'." Here, Jesus relies only on his humble obedience to the father and a recognition of his true, faithful, and abiding relationship with God.

The honest truth about us and our earthly existence is that we will never win this battle on our own. How many times do we have to "be tempted" to finally stop lying to ourselves that we can manage it all, or that we can be the masters of our own destiny? Jesus reminds us in chapter 15 of John's gospel that "apart from me you can do nothing!" We have come also believe that "though he was in the form of God, [he] did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness." Jesus's response to the devil's temptations is therefore simple, honest, humble, and obedient to his father.

Desert is a truly unique place and one that I genuinely love! I know, it may seem rather strange!

Some of you may know that at the age of 23, I moved out of Europe for the first time and relocated to Qatar in the Middle East. I spent a few years living there and my encounter with the Persian Gulf changed my life forever. Soon after, I became a research fellow at the University of London and the UK Parliament specializing in Middle Eastern politics and security. But whenever I am back in the Middle East, just like this past January when I travelled to Oman, I like to spend at least a day in the desert.

In today's Gospel, we read that "Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit ... was led by that same Spirit into the desert". Somehow, when I reread this passage a few days ago, I realized that I often gloss over this initial sentence and focus my attention instead on the temptations. But thinking back onto my own experiences of the Arabian desert, I think I understand something about that intentionality of being divinely led into the desert.

It truly is a place that forces you to stop, to clear your mind, to refocus your attention, and in humbleness to acknowledge how little you are among the vastness of God's creation. There is also something about the desert nights when no light can be seen on the horizon and the whole sky is wonderfully spangled with the constantly glittering stars, that makes me realise how in the face of God, I am so truly loved. King David writes in Psalm 139: "How precious

are your thoughts about me, O God. They cannot be numbered! I can't even count them; they outnumber the grains of sand! And when I wake up, you are still with me." That desert sand, the clear star-spangled sky, and the silence of the night always make me contemplate the wonders of our creator.

And yet, the desert is also a really harsh place. Sometimes, totally unexpectedly, a tiny little whirl of wind can cause the entire world around you to turn into a raging disaster. A sandstorm is a force of nature that destroys everything in its path and quite literally takes away all your oxygen. When I first experienced it, I was truly terrified. Gasping for air, I thought I really came close to experiencing my own mortality. Gasping for air, in the midst of the tons of particles of sand filling all my cavities, I realised my utter dependence on God.

I am convinced that each one of us here knows the experience of such a sandstorm in our own lives, even if only metaphorically. All of us will one day go through a moment when quite unexpectedly, things around us change and will never be the same again. Our lives become changed forever. Be it the death of a loved one, the death of a dream that we've always kept so tenderly in our hearts, a broken relationship, a balding head, or an unexpected illness. Such sandstorm moments bring us uncomfortably close to the reality of the words that we heard only a few days ago: "Remember that you are dust and to dust, you shall return."

The experience of the desert inevitably humbles us, reminds us of our fragility, offers us an opportunity to reassess our lives, our relationship with God and one another. Quite often – painfully often, I would say; in the midst of those life desert situations, or the ongoing temptations, we come to find ourselves doing just the wrong thing over and over again. Just like the Israelites, wandering in the wilderness for forty long years and failing to live into the covenantal relationship with their LORD God, so too we are being constantly smacked with the agonising image of our unfaithfulness and sin. But Jesus is ever faithful and full of compassion. He loved us so much that he gave his life so that we may come to experience salvation.

So again, I invite us all, during this Lenten season, to allow the Holy Spirit to lead us into our own desert spaces, where we can render our hearts open, and to intentionally reserve some time to renew our relationship with our creator, ... to walk humbly with our God. I believe that lent is not so much a season for giving something up, though surely there is lots that we ought to give up in our lives. But more importantly, it is a time for taking upon ourselves a task of renewing our life of faith. Let us intentionally build a stronger spiritual relationship with God, so that we may become more receptive to and aware of his grace in our lives. Let us allow the Holy Spirit to lead us into and through our own desert spaces. May we allow Jesus to teach us humility and when things go wrong in our lives, let him pray in us to his loving Father on whose grace we are so dependent.

And now to God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Ghost be ascribed as is most justly due, all might, majesty, power and dominion, world without end. Amen.