

God Teaches the Humble the Way
Rev. Thomas Cary Kinder
United Church of Strafford, Vermont
February 18, 2024, First Sunday in Lent
Psalms 25 & 91; Mark 1:9-15

Welcome to the United Church of Strafford, Vermont, an Open and Affirming Congregation, on this First Sunday in Lent. Welcome to you who are in the sanctuary and welcome to you online.

We acknowledge that we are on the ancestral and unceded land of the traditional caretakers, the Western Abenaki people. We share the belief that the land and all life are gifts of the Spirit, and that our role is to honor and protect the creation, building a loving community that includes all.

Two wilderness journeys serve as metaphors for Lent: the forty days Jesus spent being tempted and tried and the forty years Moses and the children of Israel wandered lost.

A Lenten spiritual says, “We must walk this lonesome valley, we have to walk it by ourselves.” But another one says, “I Want Jesus to Walk with Me.” We may have to walk a lonesome valley, but Jesus walks with us, and we walk together as a people, even when we feel alone.

We need each other in a wilderness or dark night, in all our struggles. So if you are in a lost or lonely place this Lent, please be sure to linger after the service and appreciate these others who are walking with you, both in person and online, and know that it helps them that you are here.

And if you are not in a Lenten place, but are full of light, then please be sure to linger after the service to extend your care and support to the people around you, especially to those you do not know or those you know are having a hard time, both in the sanctuary and on Zoom.

Call to Worship Lent recalls Jesus in the wilderness and also in his last days journeying toward the cross and the light of Easter dawn. Lent is about our own journey toward Easter—preparing ourselves to die to our fearful, self-concerned self and be resurrected true to our loving, Spirit-filled self.

Lent prepares us as the wilderness prepared Jesus to emerge full of the Spirit's power for serving and changing the world. It is crucial to understand that we go through Lent for the sake of better helping others and protecting and healing all creation. That is the Spirit's agenda for us.

Lent calls us to trust that no matter what situation we face, every moment of every day, the best thing we can possibly do is let go of everything else and turn first to the Spirit, and then think and act in that spiritual mode of being. That is what the world most needs from us today, and what Lent trains us to do.

Let us worship together, taking these first steps on our Lenten journey...

Children's Time Today we will be reading the story of Jesus in the wilderness, but we are hearing it from the gospel of Mark, which doesn't give many details.

The gospels of Matthew and Luke say that Jesus didn't eat anything for the whole 40 days he was in the wilderness. Then the devil came when he was weak with hunger and said, "If you are the son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread." To which Jesus replied, "It is written, "One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God." The devil then offered Jesus all the kingdoms of the world if Jesus would worship him, and Jesus quoted the Hebrew scriptures saying, "Worship and serve only God." Then the devil tempted him again and again Jesus turned to God.

It reminds me of the familiar fable about a fox boasting to a cat about how many ways it has to escape from the dogs. The cat says, "Well, I know only one way, but it always works." The fox tells the cat that it can run to the back pasture and hide in a hole, it can run down the creek bed and hide under the willow roots, it can tunnel into the briar patch. After each the cat says, "Well, I know only one way, but it always works."

Then they hear a pack of dogs coming, and zip, the cat goes up a tree. But the fox can't decide whether to go to the pasture or the creek or the briars. The cat is safe, but the fox, it turns out, is not...

When we face trouble, we might be able to think of many possible paths out, or we may lie in bed worrying or compulsively planning what to do if trouble comes, but we may be like the fox and get exhausted and lost in doubt about which path to take. It is better to know one way that always works.

Spiritual wisdom says, when you are in trouble or tempted or uncertain, turn to the Spirit the way a cat turns to a tree, and let the Spirit lead you from there. We do not have to be frantic like the fox, we can be calm like the cat.

The way to climb the tree that is the Spirit is to pray. It can be a breath with just a thought of God or it can be a really short prayer, like, “HELP!” Or it can be a little longer like the Lord’s Prayer. The kind of prayer doesn’t matter. What matters is that we trust in that tree and get up in it! Let us pray together the new version of the Lord’s Prayer...

God Teaches the Humble the Way

Many religions provide annual periods designed for spiritual deepening. The wisdom of these religions acknowledges that we struggle to hold to our ideal, loving, courageous way of living in this world. We struggle with illness and loss and adversity. An annual period of intentional spiritual practice can center and strengthen us for whatever struggles we face.

Lent is meant to be one of those times. The metaphors of the season encourage us to approach our trials as Jesus did and learn to trust more completely in the Spirit. They tell us the reward of the Lenten wilderness is the possibility of entering the Promised Land, a better life for all, and of rising resurrected at Easter dawn, of emerging full of the Spirit’s gifts.

The contemporary Franciscan spiritual teacher, Richard Rohr, talks about the kind of transformation Lent is designed to help us undergo. He says, “You will remain largely unconscious as a human being until issues come into your life that you cannot fix or control and something challenges you at your present level of development, forcing you to expand and deepen. It is in the struggle with our shadow self, with failure, or with wounding, that we break into higher levels of consciousness.”

How can we find our way this Lent through the wilderness of our shadow self, our failings, our wounds? How can we be transformed to a higher level of consciousness so that we experience the joy of Easter dawn and fulfill our calling to serve?

A Lenten hymn addresses those questions. Here is its first stanza:

God, this wilderness seems trackless,
Dark night of soul a starless blackness.
Wounds, wrongs and losses tempt despair.
All my stumbling steps betray doubt.

My flailing mind can find no way out.
At last I fall to humble prayer.
I quiet as I wait.
The swirling sands abate.
Faith, courage, love:
Like stars they rise. Light fills my eyes.
Christ shows the way, his truth makes wise.

Lent calls us to face the difficult truths of our lives that we tend to avoid or deny because they are painful or scary or unsettling. To go down into those shadows can lead to what the Spanish contemplative poet, John of the Cross, described as a dark night of the soul.

The Gospels intended the wilderness to sound dangerous, with Satan and wild beasts. We need to allow our image of Jesus to include dangerous temptation from harmful desires. We need him to have suffered and struggled as we have. Lent wants us to know that wherever we go in the dark wilderness within us, Jesus has been there, too, and is waiting there now to walk with us.

Lent helps us allow Jesus to be humanly imperfect so that we can allow ourselves to be imperfect without the terrifying brutality of our self-condemnations—surely the voice of Satan if ever there was one. The Christian writer Anne Lamott says in her book *Bird by Bird* that you cannot be a good writer unless you are able to write a lousy first draft. We cannot be good followers of Christ's way unless we are able to stumble over the rough wilderness terrain of our wrongs and flail around in the dark of our doubt.

Archbishop Desmond Tutu wrote a book about South Africa's journey after apartheid called *No Future Without Forgiveness*. We need to accept forgiveness for where we have been in order to have a future that moves beyond where we are now.

Tutu talks about how Nelson Mandela emerged from twenty-seven years in prison as a man of enormous moral stature, filled with forgiveness and compassion and peace.

He became that man through terrible struggle. There is a scene in the movie *Mandela: Long Walk to Freedom* where he enters his tiny cell on Robben Island for the first time at age 46 and it sinks into him that this is where he may be for the rest of his life, sleeping on a blanket on a cold, hard cement floor, looking out a small window into a lifeless, concrete prison yard, cut off forever from his beautiful wife and young daughters. We see him stumble at times and flail in rage, grief and despair.

Mandela taught Bible Study in college and after prison he delivered sermons and honored the church, but it was the inner process he went through in prison that enabled him to see the true oneness of all people.

The 25th Psalm says:

You lead the humble in what is right,
and teach the humble your way.
Turn to me and be gracious to me,
for I am lonely and afflicted.
Relieve the troubles of my heart,
and bring me out of my distress.

Humble prayer quiets and calms us when we are struggling. It gives us patience. It increases our faith and courage for the wilderness and dark night we face. It leads to the kind of developmental growth and transformation that Mandela experienced.

We may not be in a literal prison like him, but most of us find in the shadows of our inner truth that we have some old, deeply ingrained patterns that imprison us that have not been helpful or healthful. We get stuck in our ways. We get addicted to unfruitful ways of being.

The wisdom of the 12 Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous is profound and powerful, and it is related to the wisdom of Psalm 25. It guides us to turn our will and our life over to the care of our higher power, trusting that the Spirit will lead us safely through life even as our old habits or demons come attacking.

And where is it leading?

The same hymn says,

Spirit leads to confrontation
With foes of soul and of creation.
Christ leads us out to serve all earth.
Wilderness is our preparing
For paths of loving, healing, caring.
Dark nights of soul are throes of birth.

Nelson Mandela said that until he changed himself, he could not hope to change others. That is why Lent invites us to deepen our spiritual life. We change ourselves so that we may have the hope of changing the world around us into something more like God's realm of compassion, justice and peace.

Let us seek that path through the Lenten wilderness now by turning to God in humble prayer. Let us pray in silence...

Haiku by Mel Goertz:
Our extended family—
birds and baby squirrels
who come here to feed.