



ST. MICHAEL'S SERMONS

Greenville, SC

February 25, 2007

Luke 4:1-13

Vicar Elise Stringer

"Avoiding The Desert"

"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."

Forty days in the wilderness.

In the hot, dry, desolate land of the desert. No cool place to stop and take a water break, no tree to crawl under for shade from the scorching sun. No rivers, streams or lakes from which to dip a hand of refreshing water. It was the wilderness, the desert, a quiet, lonely place.

As humans we avoid those places, we avoid the desert.

In the wonderfully imaginative and animated book, "Where the Wild Things Are," one night, a little boy named Max, the star of the book, was misbehaving, so his mom sent him to bed without his supper. Max, angry and alone in his room, imagined a forest growing all around him and one began to grow, until the ceiling hung with vines and the walls became the world all around.

And an ocean tumbled by with a private boat for Max and he sailed off through night and day, in and out of weeks and over a year to where the wild things are.

And when he came to the place where the wild things are they roared their terrible roars and gnashed their terrible teeth and rolled their terrible eyes and showed their terrible claws...

They did this until Max said "**Be Still!**" and tamed them with his magic by staring into their yellow eyes without blinking once. Once he had them tamed, Max stayed with the wild things for a while, enjoying a wild rumpus as he called it. They even made him king of the wild things. Until one day, Max realized he was lonely. He wanted to be where someone loved him best of all, so Max headed home, waving goodbye to all the wild things. **He sailed back to the place where he was loved, his home!**

Where the wild things are...the jungle, the wilderness, and the desert, the places where we feel alone and sometimes scared. The places in our lives where we feel starved... starved for love, for human affection, for comfort and familiarity, for peace and forgiveness, the places where we're separated from those who love us most, the places where our own needs are more important than those of the least, the lost and the last, the places where our fear of failure and our feelings of inadequacy overwhelm us, the places where our guilt and selfishness bind us up.

We avoid those places, those places remind us we're human, we're fallible, we're fragile, we're weak. Those places remind us we're dependent on someone greater than ourselves, we're dependent on God.

Max is just a little boy in a storybook, a little boy who traveled to a place of imaginary monsters, but the place where the wild things are is a very real place, a place most of us can relate to, a place we've all been- the jungle, the wilderness, the desert, it's a place we avoid if and when it's possible.

But why do we try so hard to avoid that place, to avoid the desert?

The familiar words of a well known prayer are engraved in my mind. ***“Now I lay me down to sleep, I pray the Lord my soul to keep. If I should die before I wake, I pray the Lord my soul to take.”***

That’s the prayer my mama said with me every night before bed from the time I was two years old. I memorized that prayer; it became a part of me. It was like a security blanket. When I heard “things” go bump in the night I repeated that prayer, at five years old, that night time prayer my mama taught me was my comfort in the desert, in those scary places of the night. I didn’t understand why or how, I just knew that if I said that prayer, I felt better, I felt surrounded by love and comfort.

Now, even at 27-years-old those words still play in my head every night when I lay down. No matter how tired I am, even when I’m not thinking about saying those words, whether I’m at home or out of town, in a tent or in my bed, they just come to me. It’s not something I plan, it just happens. It’s ritual, it’s comforting, and it’s familiar. Those words remind me that I’m not alone. They remind me that I’m loved, that no matter what may come, God can handle it. And in the wilderness of this world I need a reminder that I’m not on the journey alone.

“Jesus was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, where for forty days he was tempted by the devil.”

Who but our Lord and Savior would be willingly to go to this place, led in the Spirit, to suffer and to die for us?

To be tempted, starved and powerless...and through all this Jesus never gave in to be more or less than God created Him to be, the Son of God in flesh and blood sent to live and to die a man, to save us from sin.

The devil tempted Jesus, saying...

“If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread.”

...A tempting tactic on the part of the Devil... when you’re hungry turn the stone into bread and eat. No more yearning for fullness. This tempting offer by the devil leads us to believe that we can have what we want at our beck and call. By the snap of our fingers we fill the hole at the bottom of our being.

Then the devil said... “If you then will worship me, all power and authority will be yours.”

Yet another temptation: power....Why not? All power and authority at our finger tips? Control over our lives. If only we could dominate, have things our way, then we wouldn’t fear the terrors of the night, we wouldn’t fear the desert and its emptiness, we would be in control of our own journey.

How easy it is to believe we are in control, to believe we aren’t tempted by our desire to be God, the desire to believe we don’t need God, because we can handle it just fine by ourselves.

The good news is that Jesus understood temptation, he was aware of it and that gave him power over the devil and all his empty promises. The devil tempted Jesus to take the shortcut, to escape His mission of humanity, to suffer and die in love for all people.

But Jesus resisted, he faced the reality of the temptation and he defeated the devil.

If we simply ignore the reality of temptation, the sin that invades our lives, the sin that decays our bodies, then we are defenseless against it. When we fail to look ourselves in the mirror, acknowledging that temptation is real, then we fall prey to the desire to be someone other than who God has created us to be- a beloved child of God, washed in the waters of Baptism, forgiven and sent into the world to proclaim the good news of God’s unflinching love.

Our human tendency is to escape and deny the truth of our frail skin, to avoid the desert, the loneliness, the loss of familiar support, the quiet stillness of a place where we journey alone.

Why not take the shortcut, avoid the desert?

If we go into the desert, if we journey into the wilderness, we'll only be reminded of the hunger, of the pain, of our powerlessness, of our humanity.

The Church is also faced with the temptation to take the shortcut. God's people are always tempted to bypass the way of the cross, which is to enter the desert land, suffer, die and be raised to new life in Christ.

But we ask ourselves... surely the church's mission doesn't have to involve sacrificing our own needs and comforts in order to witness to God's love and mercy. Surely we don't have to be a missionary who travels to Indonesia and lives with headhunters for 40 years to spread the Gospel. Surely as the Church we don't have to challenge each other to live out Jesus' message of love and forgiveness in all we say and do.

After all, the church is a nice community where people feel comfortable and make new friends and have nice experiences.

We aren't in the desert here. The seats beneath us don't burn with the heat of the desert sun, there's plenty of water to be had and there's always time to rest. Let's not disturb this comfortable place with all that God talk. No need to confront people with silly talk about sin and the devil.

(Painting joke... Repaint and Thin No More!—Repent and Sin No More!)

But the Good news of the Gospel is that as Christians we have been given the story of faith, our very lives are woven into the life and ministry of Jesus Christ and He conquered sin, death and the devil so we do not have to. He fought the ultimate battle for us and it is because of this reality that we too may know and understand temptation, acknowledging that it is real.

As children of a living God, given the cross of Christ as our shield, we too can resist the temptation to take the shortcut, to deny the fact that we are dependent on God for everything, for our very lives.

Living as an Easter people, we no longer have to avoid the desert, but can boldly go where all have been and prefer not to return to.

We can journey into the deserts of our lives knowing that God walks with us, He meets us in the midst of our pain and suffering, in the midst of our sin and temptation and offers a word of peace, a word of hope and of forgiveness.

Even in those places where the wild things are, the desert lands where the battles of life still rage, the battles against poverty and sick children, the battles against cancer and broken families, the battles against anger and war, the battles against domestic violence and alzheimers, the battles against alcohol and addiction, even in those places Jesus Christ walks with us, and when we can't walk on our own, he carries us.

Through his life, death and resurrection, through his body and blood, we are given the strength to go on, the strength to resist the temptation to live anything less than bold lives of love and service to God and others.

Together, you and me, together, we St. Michael Lutheran Church journey to the cross, as we begin these forty days of Lent, may we together find the desert is the ***place where we are transformed, where we walk from darkness into light, where we are made whole and new, from out of the dust of Ash Wednesday rises new life. And because of this, we no longer need fear the desert, because we know Christ walks with us!***

Thanks Be to God!