

1 Lent

February 14, 2016

Rev Ken Wratten at St. Stephen's

Deuteronomy 26:5-11

Moses farewell address

Romans 10:8b-13

If you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.

Luke 4:1-13

Jesus' temptation in the wilderness

When I was 28 years old, my mother was diagnosed with breast cancer. Following surgery, there was a recurrence; there were more surgeries; the cancer would not stop spreading. The prognosis was not good. Mom lived in NNY, and my family and I lived in PA. I wanted to move back to my home town to be with my mom, and for our daughters to know my mom. Ruth agreed, and we moved. My dad offered for me to work in the family RV business with him and my two brothers.

Our family is pretty well known in our little home town. Before the RV business my dad ran an insurance agency, sold real estate, sold jewelry, was the village Police Justice, and ran a restaurant; all while I was growing up. So moving home brought me some nice recognition; everyone knew me, and they respected why I came back home.

My mother passed away about a year after I moved to NNY. A couple of years after my mother passed away, there was a serious recession. RV sales went down – a long ways down, and so did my income. But I would not consider making a change. Ruth asked me – many times – about moving, about other work, and I flatly ended the conversation. I would not consider making a change. The tension grew between us.

Finally, my health started to suffer. I ended up in an emergency room with pains in my chest – at age 30. I was sure I was dying of a heart attack. It wasn't a heart attack – it was stress. I was in the deepest wilderness experience of my life. I had to face the power of my own ego.

Moses spent 40 years in the wilderness leading the Israelites. They constantly faced temptations of impatience, distrust, envy, and feeding their own egos. Moses was their connection with the Spirit of God, empowering them to get back on track, finding their own spiritual centering: where God's presence lived within them.

In the prologue of John's Gospel, John names Jesus to be the Word – with a capital W. Jesus is the Word: the living expression of God's intention for us. God created us; God's essence and presence lived within Jesus and lives within us. And Jesus was called into the wilderness for forty days by God the Spirit to empower him, and to show us the importance of our own wilderness experiences.

Jesus' life included choices – some of them temptations – and decisions about those choices. He was tempted in the Garden of Gethsemane – “Father, take this cup from me.” And he was tempted in the wilderness – with food that would dull his centering from fasting; with promises of power that would feed his ego; and with protection from harm that would express his divine nature rather than his human nature. Jesus was drawn just like the rest of us are, to consider decisions or actions based on ego.

But Jesus also shows – by trusting in the Spirit, how to be centered in the Spirit – who lives in us, too – rather than trusting in ego. That centering place is God's presence in each of us. This message is at the heart of Celtic Christianity, and is an important element in the way we handle our own wilderness experiences.

In the third century there were hundreds of Christians who lived as monks in the deserts of Egypt. This wilderness life was an intentional choice, as a way to bring focus to the spiritual center within themselves. They held the belief that the desert brought focus to two questions: What do you learn to ignore in life; and what do you learn to love in life. How do you let go; and what do you hold onto?

In Adams, NY I had a pretty intense wilderness experience. There have been others in my life, not so intense. They have been times to discern if my life is directed by my own ego and pride, or if my life is being directed by the essence of God at the center of my being.

Lent is our annual forty day time in the wilderness; for most of us this will not be a physical desert; but if we let it, it can be a time to explore what forces direct us. It can be a time to choose the source we rely on to keep our ego in check, and to give authority to the Godly presence in us. May this season of Lent be a time for you of searching, self-discovery, revelation, and transformation. Amen.