

“Into the Wilderness” First Sunday of Lent The Rev. Keenan Kelsey
Noe Valley Ministry PC(USA) March 1, 2009

Text: Mark 1:9-15 In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, ‘You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.’ And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. He was in the wilderness for forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him. Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, ‘The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.’

At Heathrow Airport in London, you are greeted, in the walkway just off the airplane, with a series of billboards sponsored by a local bank. One series began with a picture of delicious piece of chocolate cake. The title was “good.” The next photo was a fresh piece of broccoli. The title was “bad.” The third picture returned to the chocolate cake only this time the title was “bad.” The fourth panel showed the broccoli again, with the title “Good.” The punch line was “Another point of view can open up a whole new world.”

Lent is about another point of view. This is a time in our church year for intensifying and growing the practice of our Christian spirituality, for honing our skills in doing those things of the Spirit. It is about turning from present thinking and acting, rejecting long held assumptions and expectations, letting go of judgments and resentments, and surrendering to grace and guidance and will of God. Phoebe pointed out to me that President Obama’s speech this week was about Lent: He said, in effect “People, we are better than this. We have gone astray. Return to your values. We are a great people, and we’ve forgotten that.” He issued a call to rebuild and to return to a vision for the America we want for our children.

Many people give up something for Lent, make some sort of sacrifice. But it is only a Lenten practice if that giving up is attached to some taking on. If you give up ice cream, will you use that extra money to help someone else, or that extra time in prayer or reflection?

Lent is often likened to a time in the wilderness. And indeed, every year, the lectionary passages lead us into the chaos of a flood, and the desolation of the wilderness. We are back at the beginning of Mark’s gospel. After the astonishing moment when Jesus is blessed by God, named as God’s own beloved, we hear of the arrest of John the Baptist and of Jesus being driven into the wilderness. Not invited. Not escorted. Not instructed. But sent. The Aramaic word, has the force of being compelled or driven, into the wilderness.

Most of you know I have just returned from the Holy Lands. I want to tell you a present-day wilderness story that took place on the final day of our olive tree planting.

Our group of 39 went to Al Jab'a, a very small, pretty Palestinian community on the southwest of Bethlehem -- Less than 1000 people – nice, simple people working in agriculture.

Over more than four decades of military occupation farmers' lands throughout Palestine have been subject to various procedures by the Israeli Civil Administration-- from confiscation for "security reasons," seizures of land for paving bypass roads, and most recently the construction of the Annexation Wall. In Jab'a, the Israeli Ministry of Agriculture has been planting Palestinian land with pine trees in order to confiscate it as a 'green area,' and then offer it to settlements.

We were headed for land belonging to Abu Firas. The field had been seized in 2000 and paved over as a parking lot. About 2005, the military abandoned it, and Abu Firas spent 4 years restoring it.

We were excited to help this good man! We fanned out over the rocky terrain, dug holes with our pick axes, loosened the dirt, took out extraneous stones. We removed each tree from its black plastic bag, and put it gently into the hole; made sure the sapling had been properly trimmed; covered the root ball and tamped down the dirt. We put a white plastic sleeve over the tree to protect it from nibbling animals, added a stake for support, and put rocks around the base of the tree to avoid any moisture evaporation. There was no water to add, rain was God's part in the project. That day, a funny white burro helped carry the small trees, and folks took turns riding him around the fields.

Soon, four armed Israeli military officers showed up. The farmer produced papers indicating that he had permission to plant trees on his own land. After much back and forth, the officers left. We were urged to work faster. They would be back, our leader said, and we needed to get all the trees planted. The military returned in two hours, with a newly created order declaring the planting area a closed military zone.

Six soldiers with automatic rifles strapped across their chests escorted us off the land. I was among the outraged. This was a true wilderness experience. And like Jesus, I had my temptations. I turned to approach one soldier. I wanted to stick my camera in his face and ask him what he was doing. After all, I am an American tourist, what can he do to me? But the men were menacing. My camera would have been smashed. And in my arrogant outrage, I suddenly remembered, this was not about me. It was about the farmer. Lack of cooperation would not help the farmer; it would not help the program. We left meekly, sharing a meal prepared by the farmer's family on the side of the road. But in contrast to previous days, the mood was somber as we ate.

Now I hear that several days later, some youngsters collecting firewood near Abu Firas' field noticed several police vehicles, and then witnessed Israeli soldiers uprooting and taking the trees planted on the field (about \$9,000 worth of trees). Abu Firas has documents dating to the Ottoman era proving his ownership of his land. His family's ownership of land was also respected by the British Mandate and Jordanian authorities. Appeals are being made to recover the stolen property, but the process will be long and tedious.

There is no need to say that deep in his heart Abu Firas will feel that he failed all the generations that before him, who preserved the land, and no need to tell how the coming generations of his family will think of him. I was tempted again to imagine billboards, like the ones at Heathrow airport, with a picture of Palestinian farmers and the word "Good," and a picture of Israeli military, with the word "Bad." But I know there

are faithful people who see the opposite as well, who would continue the billboard series with Palestinian “Bad,” Israeli “Good.” Behind the “Palestinian good” is the specter of terrorist attacks and suicide bombings and Saudi textbooks (not, however, Palestinian textbooks) which label Jews as cattle and swine. And behind the “Israeli bad” is the specter of the Holocaust and the genuinely pious Orthodox teacher and parent and merchant.

The lessons of the wilderness teach me tolerance. It is not a place for making judgments or getting quagmire in blame or complaint. The lessons are about trust and perseverance. Noah had to ride out the storm. Jesus’ had to persevere, to resist temptations. Both had to trust that God is always doing a new thing; God is always growing something, even in the hardest times; God is always holding a bigger picture.

The experience of wilderness, of chaos, of fear, of doubt, even of anger, is a common denominator for all humans. We all have wilderness, and seldom of our choosing. Jobs are lost, children rebel, our bodies let us down, cancer invades, hopes are dashed, people die. In the wilderness, God often seems absent. Its duration feels like forever. It is full of loneliness and doubt and fear and anger. But what the wilderness is never about, is being alone. We may feel isolated, we may even want to withdraw, but the way through is always to reach out, to God and to each other.

After all, in the end, the gift after the Flood was a rainbow, sealing covenant of promise for all living things. In the end the gift after the temptations was clarity and purpose-- and there were angels to tend Jesus. The way through the wilderness is about moving forward, one step at a time, not giving in to despair or isolation, continuing to live as though the mountain tip of land was around the bend, continuing to believe that God alone holds us, and that there will always be angels tend us.

Abu Firas lives in a wilderness I cannot understand or appreciate. But he tells me, and each planter and each visitor, that we are the angels who tend him at the end of the day. He says we reassure him that they are not alone. His life is part of a much larger whole, and like me Abu Firas believes in the presence of God, and the promises of Jesus. He is willing to keep fighting, trusting in a larger picture than he can see, serenading to God’s promise that we are all beloved. And the truth is, this particular situation is garnering a lot of attention. The case seems clear cut and already human rights lawyers are gathering evidence and people are collecting funds to forge an appeal. It may be that Abu Firas’ wilderness will lead to rainbows and angels.

If we persevere, if we trust, if we reach out, like Jesus, we may come to know ourselves and our God more deeply. If we are willing to embrace these times, and glean from them what we can, we will find, like Jesus, that we too can rise from these encounters in the power of the Spirit, with a renewed sense of purpose and a closer walk with our God.

Wilderness good? Wilderness bad? You decide. You make up your own billboards. But know that the communion we are about to share is a gift of strength and of promise and of hope. It is the gift of nourishment and the gift of community. When we gather at this table, no matter what difficulties we face, no matter how hard things get, we are not alone. We are never alone. Thanks be to God!

Barack Obama said, But in my life, I have also learned that hope is found in unlikely places; that inspiration often comes not from those with the most power or celebrity, but from the dreams and aspirations of Americans who are anything but ordinary.

This wasn't really a budget speech, or even a State of the Union. It was a call to rebuild a country -- from its infrastructure, to its economy, to its values. Last night, Barack Obama called a new generation to a new American future. And from the "twittering" and Facebook status updates I am aware of going on last night, the new generation stayed up late to watch and got the speech they wanted—There hasn't been as much political vision or ambition in the chamber of the House of Representatives for decades as there was last night. It wasn't just a list of little

ideas or a recitation of familiar symbols; it was a substantial diagnosis of America's crisis and the bold promise to find the solutions necessary. If the inaugural speech disappointed some for being more sobering than visionary, the call to action they were waiting for came last night.

The new president boldly declared that it is time to meet the big challenges. After telling Americans for the last month what we were up against, he said that America can and will rise to meet the challenge.

... while our economy may be weakened and our confidence shaken; though we are living through difficult and uncertain times, tonight I want every American to know this: We will rebuild, we will recover, and the United States of America will emerge stronger than before.

After succeeding in passing the most aggressive economic recovery plan in memory, despite a united opposition, Obama sounded absolutely optimistic about the budget he will present this week.

In the next few days, I will submit a budget to Congress. So often, we have come to view these documents as simply numbers on a page or laundry lists of programs. I see this document differently. I see it as a vision for America - as a blueprint for our future.

He said both his stimulus plan and his budget will focus on beginning to fix the biggest issues—energy dependence, broken health care, and failed education. He said our crisis has come from ignoring, neglecting, and postponing solutions to core problems like these while, at the same time, spending money we didn't have to buy things we didn't need.

But the "day of reckoning has arrived," said the new president, and "now is the time" to solve our biggest

problems—and while the problems are great, we will solve them.

Some of the most important ideas, lines, and promises were:

Stressing that the economic recovery is “not about saving banks, but helping people.”

Reminding us that “responsibility for our children’s education begins at home.”

Promising to support both soldiers and veterans, but to also get rid of outdated Cold War weapons systems.

Pledging to cut unnecessary subsidies to agribusiness and eliminate no-bid contracts like in Iraq -- big tasks that politics has been unwilling to take on.

Committing that we will no longer hide the price of war in the budget.

Stating emphatically that “the United States of America does not torture,” especially saying it the night after Jack Bauer and 24.

Recognizing that the biggest deficit we face is the “deficit of trust” that Americans feel for their leaders and their lack of solutions.

Louisiana Governor Bobby Jindal, a rising star for the Republicans, could not muster a compelling vision counter to what the president proposed. He admitted that his party had failed the country but then used the story of incompetent political appointees and the bureaucratic mess they created in response to Katrina to try to make a point that government never works. But that didn't work.

In contrast to the simple Democratic reliance on the government or the Republican mantra of the invisible hand of the market to solve our problems, Obama called for a new commitment to the common good, collective action, and a new combination of both personal and social responsibility.

He said, in closing:

Those of us gathered here tonight have been called to govern in extraordinary times. It is a tremendous burden, but also a great privilege - one that has been entrusted to few generations of Americans. For in our hands lies the ability to shape our world for good or for ill. I know that it is easy to lose sight of this truth - to become cynical and doubtful; consumed with the petty and the trivial.

Some people don't like strong leadership. I do. And this is the kind of leadership that calls and inspires people to act themselves and be part of the solutions we need. I like that too. And it's a new kind of leadership that invites being held accountable to results. That's fair.

. Disagreement comes with a responsibility to offer better ideas, says this president.

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