

Lent 1 - 2010

Read the Text: Luke 4

There he is

Alone

Hungry

Fighting off self doubt and the terrible promise of his own power to choose.

The heat beats down

Somewhere, the pitiful cry of a small rodent being carried away in the talons of a winged predator.

Everything needs to eat.

For every kind of food, there is a breaking.

Something flutters. Something large and brooding bides its time.

There is no bread.

I want to tell you about two conversations I had the week of my course.

First - a woman taking the course with me. Her 17 year old son – self declared atheist – “It’s all bunch of trash” he tells his mother. “This God stuff – it’s lame”.

A big part of that, of course, is that his mom is the minister. She knows, with at least part of her heart, that this is a natural and even good thing for his personal development, but still....

Then

Just before Christmas this year, he goes to a party, drinks too much

And wraps his car around a tree.

He and his passenger walk away with only scratches.

He goes to his mother and says “*Now* I know there is a god.”

Hmmm.

The second conversation. Same day.

A phone call from New Brunswick.

My friend Kathleen.

I had walked with her through some of the aftermath of her son’s death. This is how he died. In 1988, at age 19, he left NB and went to Ontario to work. He got a room in the home of a friend of the family. It was safer that way; more like home, you know? One evening - as he slept after his shift - an acquaintance of the family, also a young man, came to the house, picked up a baseball bat and hit him repeatedly on the head until he died. When asked why, in court and since, he says that he wanted to know what it would be like to kill someone.

That was several years ago now. This past week she found out that one of her remaining sons has terminal cancer.

One mother's son brought to faith by a car accident in which he ought to have died and did not. Another mother's son killed as he slept in his bed.

Where is God in each of those scenarios?

Look at Jesus – there he is – alone. Hungry.

Something flutters. Something else, large and brooding, flexes its feathers and waits for the hatching.

Somewhere else, a predator waits for the hatching too.

Everything needs to eat

For every kind of food there is a breaking.

This is the very essence of Lent. This is the wilderness to which we will turn. In that wilderness, kneels a man wrestling with the future of the world. In the wilderness there is emptiness and doubt. This account of Jesus' temptations is placed by Luke immediately after his baptism. Only days ago - or was it a lifetime – there had been a Voice, strong and clear – unequivocal. “This is my beloved” the Voice had said. “In whom I am well pleased”.

Now, another voice.

“If you are the Son of God...turn these stones to bread”

“If you are the Son of God...throw yourself off the pinnacle of the temple – its says right in the Bible that God won't let you be hurt. God will bear you up on eagles' wings, it says. You will not even dash your foot against a stone. What's the matter, son of God – don't you believe the Bible? Not as holy as you led us to believe eh????”

“Look – I'm in charge here...I'm the one to come to if you want anything around here. Just worship me and together – you and I can do wonders. What do you say, son of God?”

Not so long ago, from the skies a dove had descended. Pure. Clear for all to see.

Now, from those same skies descend only questions, temptation, the smell of fear; and the only birds are the circling vultures wondering if there will be a meal for them in the near future.

Look at him.

Hungry.

Tempted to give in. Wanting the certainty of the dove's song when the only available sound is the squawk of self doubt.

This is the way of the world. Paradox. Cruciform.

The same wings that swoop to carry a falling chick, bearing up a baby too soon fallen from the nest – those same wings will swoop to terrorize and then capture prey. **Why? Why is the world like this??????**

In the wilderness of Lent we are asked to face the soft exposed underbelly of life on this planet. And to ask the question – IS there meaning at all? Is there something – *anything?* – that is ultimate? If there really is a God, why do horrible things happen? If the Bible is really true then why didn't the angels swoop down and save Kathleen's son? Stay the hand of his murderer? Why?

And since life clearly isn't fair, then why not milk it for all it's worth? Why not just get what we can before we get out?

Why not just dazzle the crowds for profit

Take bread at any cost

Maybe it's all for nothing in the end, maybe there's – nothing – and we've been fooling ourselves and we're as likely to have our heads beaten in as we are to be rescued by angels.

Aren't angels supposed to swoop down and save you if you pray hard enough? They will bear you up on eagles' wings lest you dash your foot against a stone.

Yea???? Tell that to my friend Kathleen.

What kind of God IS this?

If there were easy answers, we could all go home right now.

There are none. That's what the wilderness is about.

There is only choice after choice after choice in the midst of temptation, questions, and human need. Oh – and also, gut wrenching beauty.

Glory and pain

Doves and vultures

Hunger, and the promise of cheap but costly bread.

And the man kneeling there, making his choice. And you, sitting there, making yours.

For every kind of food, there is a breaking.

One more story: My friend Denise. A professional woman... someone who likes order, justice, who wants to live right and help put things right. A good, good person. Denise and her husband got pregnant – everyone was so happy for them. Twin boys. Nathan and Lucas, she named them before they were born.

At 7 months into her pregnancy, Lucas stopped moving. She gave birth not long after, to one live and one dead twin and Denise's world spun apart. There was no way to make sense of a senseless death of a child not even able to take his first breath. Nothing could console her; and she slipped into a wilderness that was truly frightening to witness.

One day, she found a feather.

What that feather did for her was – amazing. I can't explain it and neither can she, but for her the feather was a sign – a message – a love note from a God she had stopped calling out to. A crumb of bread in her hunger....A whisper of hope in a terrible silent void. It was enough.

Feathers are now her symbol. At the worst times, (and years later, she still has times in the wilderness...) in the darkest nights of her soul, she'll find one...and it will do its work, remind her. Bring her back to her deepest self; help her remember who she is – and who God is. God, not as someone who *caused* her baby to die; Not a God who *could have saved him and chose not to* But a God who, though sometimes silent, walks with her and shares her doubts, shares the pain and the temptation to despair. Jesus stays hungry. Sometimes we don't get angels But we do get a feather.

*Sometimes we don't get angels
But we do get a feather.*

Sometimes we don't get a loaf of bread, but we do get a crumb.

Angels do not always swoop down to protect us.
But every once in a while...we find a feather – and it's enough.

We're about to break bread together. The bread tastes, frankly, a bit like feathers. *Much has been broken so that we may eat.*

The God who waits for us here at this table is not a God of miracles and crowd dazzling tricks.
The God we see in Jesus IS the very bread broken
Broken
So that we may eat even a crumb
And be sustained
May God bless you; and in whatever wilderness is yours, may you find, from time to time, a feather
And in the meantime, come to the table
There is bread in the wilderness after all.
Amen