

## **SERMON LENT 1A 2017**

### **ALL SAINTS BIRKENHEAD**

#### **THE REVEREND JORDAN GREATBATCH**

Why do bad things happen to good people? That is the title of the famous book by Harold S. Kushner. It tells of his own struggles when his then three-year-old son was diagnosed with a degenerative disease that meant the boy would only live until his early teens, he was faced with one of life's most difficult questions: Why, God? It is not an unfamiliar feeling for many of us when bad things happen, whether they are big or small. Sometimes people refer to these experiences as 'wilderness experiences'. That phrase comes directly from our Gospel reading today. Jesus' time in the wilderness. So what does his time in the wilderness perhaps offer us not only in this time of Lent, but also in our own wilderness experiences?

Well it is no accident that Jesus winds up in the wilderness after his baptism.

He is not lost, and he is not being punished for something he has done wrong. He has been led by the

Holy Spirit for a purpose: to be tempted or tested by the devil. His conversation with the devil debate with is a proof of his readiness as God's beloved Son, for the mission entrusted to him. He has the credentials and the authority for this mission, fully demonstrated in Matthew's Gospel by the genealogy and birth narrative. Now, through this wilderness test, Jesus stands squarely in the long history of the people of God even as his encounter with the devil points ahead to a future as yet unfolding before him.

Throughout the scriptures, the wilderness represents a place of preparation, a place of waiting for God's next move, a place of learning to trust in God's mercy. For forty days and nights Jesus remains in the wilderness, without food, getting ready for what comes next. Forty days is also highly significant in the scriptures.

Forty: the days and nights that Noah and his family endured the deluge on board the ark, after which God made a covenant never again to destroy the earth with a flood;

Forty: the days and nights Moses fasted on Mount Sinai as he inscribed the words of God's covenant for the Israelites.

Forty: the days and nights Elijah fasted in the desert before receiving a new commission from God.

Forty: the years the Israelites wandered the wilderness in preparation for their arrival in the Promised Land

Forty: the days of the season of Lent as Christians participate in Jesus' ministry and follow his way toward the cross.

So how might we make ourselves ready for the way of the Lord in the places we are called to be? To what mission is God calling us his church? What is needed for us as a congregation, corporately and individually, to be prepared? Let us see how Jesus dealt with his experience that it may enlighten and encourage our own this Lent.

We firstly have the Devil taking advantage of Jesus' hunger, the devil tries to entice his opponent to grasp security for its own sake (amass more than his share of food--turn stones into multiple loaves of bread), demonstrate his close association with the powerful

(prove that God's angels will keep him from injury) and secure the glory of political leadership (rule the kingdoms of the world). The temptation is not that food, power and leadership are inherently wrong, but rather that they can be used for the wrong ends, or at the wrong time.

But we also see that what happens in the wilderness does not stay in the wilderness; rather, it plays again in the life and ministry of Jesus. The answers are different on different occasions, but the choices are very much the same:

Jesus refuses in the desert to turn stones into bread to ease his own hunger, but before long he will feed thousands in the wilderness with just a few loaves and some fish and he will teach his disciples to pray to God for their "daily bread".

He refuses to take advantage of his relationship to God by hurling himself down from the heights of the Temple, but at the end of his earthly ministry he endures the taunts of others while trusting God's power to the end upon the heights of a Roman cross.

He turns down the devil's offer of political leadership over the kingdoms of the world, and instead offers the

kingdom of the heavens to all those who follow him in the way of righteousness.

The wilderness tests of the Temptation account are not a one-time ordeal to get through, but they are tests of preparation for the choices Jesus makes in his earthly ministry. Indeed, you will see that throughout Matthew's Gospel the wilderness experience is replayed in Jesus' encounters with persons who are sick, hungry or in need; with persons who use their connections to power (including, perhaps, the lawyers, Pharisees and Sadducees who test him in various ways; to determine his loyalty; with persons who too easily worry about the world's assessment of greatness rather than God's, including some of his own disciples for that matter.

The promise of the gospel is that the one who is "with you always, even to the end of the age" has already gone ahead of his followers, even to the most forsaken places of the wilderness; he meets us in the most difficult tests of our own lives. No place is so desolate, so distant, or so challenging that Jesus has not already been there; no test or temptation is so great that Jesus has not already overcome it. Further, Jesus' encounter with the devil

represents in many ways his encounter with the cultural pressures of his day. And so in turn it asks of us and our culture. How do we respond to very real physical and spiritual needs? What does it look like to trust God in this context? What are appropriate uses of authority and power that serve the world by serving God? For the followers of Jesus, then and now, these are important questions about how we live out our faithfulness in the realities of daily life. And are very much Lenten themes.

So as we journey together as a community of faith this Lent, may we know that God is with us, that the wilderness experiences that we face are not dismissed away easily, however we are assured that Jesus is with us. He knows us, and he empowers us. **Amen**