

“Full to the Brim Even in the Desert”
Luke 4:1-13

As we begin the journey of Lent, I am reminded of one of the most interesting characters in JRR Tolkien’s “Lord of the Rings” fantasy novels. Gollum was a former Hobbit named Sméagol who had killed his cousin to get ahold of the awe-full Ring of Power, and then hid out deep in mountain caves with his “precious.” The ring was such an attraction to Gollum that he became so obsessed with it. It turned him into a shell of his former self. It wrecked his whole life and separated him from others. He was so under its spell that he could not see through the problem. This of course is an extreme and exaggerated way of telling a spiritually deep truth about our human experience.

We often do not realize the power of the illusory programs for happiness over us. We get programmed from an early age to seek happiness in power, esteem, and security. The only problem is that these things never last and we are stuck seeking more even if we have to violate ourselves or others to get more power, esteem, and security. We miss out on the great feast of life and love which God has prepared for us.

Jesus was so aware of these temptations and their destructive impact on our world. Even before he began his public ministry, he went out into the desert to be filled with the power of the Spirit away from the busyness and noise of the culture. He knew that if his ministry was to stay focused on God, he had to make peace with the temptations of life to find that inner strength by being filled with the power of God. The desert may seem like a strange place for such inner work. We would rather go to a comfortable spot to do this kind of work. But to put ourselves out in nature and at the mercy of a harsh wilderness sounds like punishment. Yet, people for centuries have known the power of such experiences. Jesus followed in the footsteps of his cousin John the Baptist who was a part of a whole community who also went out into the wilderness to find their spiritual footing. In the desert, one could not continue to sleepwalk through life. All of our senses are heightened as we are more aware of each moment and each sensation. The desert is not about escaping into an ideal utopia, but a delving deeply into our human experience. The desert helps us to get in touch with our deepest desires for God.

It is interesting that it was in the wilderness that Jesus faced all the temptations that appeared so many times in the rest of his ministry. Let’s listen to Luke 4:1-13:

Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, ²where for forty days he was tempted by the devil. He ate nothing at all during those days, and when they were over, he was famished. ³The devil said to him, ‘If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread.’ ⁴Jesus answered him, ‘It is written, “One does not live by bread alone.”’

⁵Then the devil led him up and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. ⁶And the devil said to him, ‘To you I will give their glory and all this authority; for it

has been given over to me, and I give it to anyone I please. ⁷ If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours.' ⁸ Jesus answered him, 'It is written, "Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him."' "

⁹ Then the devil^[a] took him to Jerusalem, and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, 'If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here, ¹⁰ for it is written, "He will command his angels concerning you, to protect you", ¹¹ and "On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone."' ¹² Jesus answered him, 'It is said, "Do not put the Lord your God to the test."' ¹³ When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time.

We often think that evil is so obvious just like Gollum. We personify Satan as a demonic being. Whenever the word Satan/devil appears in the Bible, we are trained through popular culture to think of evil and the powers of evil in the world. But in the biblical tradition, the role of Satan ("Ha Satan" in Hebrew) was that of an adversary or a tempter. He was seen as part of God's court who had the function of making sure that all perspectives are represented or at least that the other side of the argument is considered. So "the adversary" is more of a role than a name. One biblical scholar puts it this way, "The satan is an ally of God who tests the Creation to determine its soundness, a cosmic building inspector who enforces the Universal Building Code. In later stories and later religious imagination, the satan becomes Satan, the enemy of God, Creation, and all that is good and life-giving. The figure who appears in Luke's story is somewhere in between." I think that this is an important piece for us as we consider the story because it is easy to see Jesus rejecting the temptations of the Satan if it was clear to him that he was facing the "devil." But if we are true to the text and its context, then we can see that the struggles and temptations of Jesus were more subtle which is truer to life for all of us. We are rarely faced with choices that are clearly evil. Our struggles and temptations are often subtle or seem innocuous. Even when we know something is bad, we justify it to ourselves as something we just have to do. But the cost is our diminished lives. The cost is believing that life is a competition for resources and for power.

The example of Jesus shows us an expansive life of love and grace. He knew and experienced the same temptations that we do, but he also knew the source of eternal love and chose to drink from that living water that he became the living water for others.

These words from "A Sanctified Art" truly resonate with me: "Our Lenten theme, Full to the Brim, is an invitation—into a radically different Lent, into a full life. It's an invitation to be authentically who you are, to counter scarcity and injustice at every turn, to pour out even more grace wherever it is needed. And so, this Lent, let us trust—fully—that we belong to God. Let us increase our capacity to receive and give grace. Let us discover the expansive life God dreams for us."

Lent is not about getting out of the deserts of our lives, instead it is an invitation to enter them with Spirit. In the desert, we can let go of the temptations of the world by letting God's abundant love fill us. In the desert we can fully claim the promise of our baptism to

be claimed by the Spirit! We come with the fullness of who we are as ones created in the image of God.

In her book *The Easter Mysteries*, Beatrice Bruteau shares a story about an ordinary person who realized that there was more to his life than just what his culture tells him. "A friend of mine in New York, a philosophy professor, is fond of getting into philosophical discussions with taxi drivers. He has a favorite story he likes to tell. It begins with the cabdriver showing an inclination to talk about himself, and so my friend, Norrie, asks, 'Are you happy?' 'No', says the cabbie, 'too many problems.' 'What would make you happy?' 'Give me a million dollars, and I'd have it made.' 'All right. Let's suppose you have the million dollars. What will you do?' He said he would pay off all his debts. 'Fine, they're paid. Now what?' 'Well, I'd buy a house. Maybe two or three houses, in different climates.' 'Good. Now what?' 'I'd want a wife. As long as we're fantasizing, I'll take several — let's say in different cities, and I could travel around to them.' 'Done. Now what?' Then he proposed to travel, to indulge his hobbies, to see and do things he's always dreamed of and each time Norrie agreed; 'Granted. What more?'

"After a while the driver began to quiet down. Then he suddenly turned around, right in the middle of a crowded avenue, giving my poor friend quite a fright, and said, 'Say, there's something funny going on here. I can't seem to get to the bottom of all this. What am I really looking for, after all?' At that point the philosopher had him hooked and was able to show him that the human being has an unlimited capacity for the good, for happiness — or better, we have a capacity for the Infinite, for nothing finite satisfies us. No matter how much we have, we don't feel that this is it; we want to go on."

I pray that this Lent, you will allow God to bless you with the power of eternal love so your life may be blessed with divine awareness every step of the way. Lent is an opportune time in the wilderness to be a spring for your soul to continue to grow in your connection with God. We will end with a blessing from Joyce Rupp that involves our whole being. I will invite you to place your hands over different parts of your body to allow God to bless them.

Forehead

May the Gospel teachings about non-judgment resound in your thoughts of others.

Ears

May you listen closely to how God invites you to grow spiritually during this Lenten season.

Eyes

May you slow down and look more intently in order to find God's movement in your life.

Shoulders

May you carry your cross of difficulties with courage, trusting God's strength to uphold you.

Hands

May your service be so intertwined with God that this love overflows from your heart.

Heart

May you keep turning your heart toward God and allow this love to be reflected in the way you live your life.

Feet

May you welcome God's companionship and guidance as you travel the path of life.

Turn to a neighbor and tell them:

Return with all your heart.

Remember the Holy Spirit dwells in you.

Be at peace. Amen.