

Yes, this is the first Sunday of Lent and every year on this Sunday we read about Jesus' time in the desert and the temptations by Satan. This event follows immediately after Jesus is baptized by John and a voice from heaven declares that Jesus is the beloved son. Did that shake Jesus up? Did he go off to be alone because he had to think out what that voice meant for him? Mark actually says "The Spirit drove Jesus out into the desert." That sounds rather scary to me. The Spirit threw him into the desert. Has the Spirit ever driven me somewhere or to some task? Then Mark says that he was there forty days tempted by Satan. Unlike the gospels of Matthew and Luke, we do not hear anything about the temptations nor the sparring with scriptural texts. All he tells us is that Jesus was among wild beasts and angels ministered to him. All of this in two short lines! Can you identify with any of this?

When I hear about the desert I picture rolling sand dunes and Lawrence of Arabia speeding across the sand. But desert in Israel means wilderness, wasteland. Forty days in this and I am complaining about Lent? But, as I reflect on this short passage, I start thinking that life is full of deserts or wastelands or wilderness experiences. They may come to us unplanned (maybe the Spirit plans them!) or we may seek them for some reason.

Dorothy Day, in her biography, *The Long Loneliness*, tells us how she went through a painful, desert time after her conversion to Catholicism. She had given birth to a daughter and decided to have the child baptized and she made her own profession of faith. The father of the child would have nothing to do with it and left her. Dorothy still loved this man intensely but was now alone with no money, no job, few friends, no practical dream. Things did not get better. She remained in this desert. She took a train to Washington and spent some days praying at the shrine of Our Lady. Her prayer was wrenching, naked. She was full of confusion, doubts, fears, temptations to bitterness and despair. She returned to New York with no answer but trust in God. That night as she returned to her apartment, she met a man on her front steps whose name was Peter Maurin. The rest is the story of the Catholic Worker.

I have heard many such stories. People go through terrible periods of pain and abandonment. They are at an impasse and have no answers to life. They share Jesus' abandonment in the garden of Gethsemane. They are with Jesus on the cross. Martin Luther King went through a desert as his life was threatened

because of his commitment to justice. People every day need someone to reach out and be a Peter Maurin for them. It is so remarkable that such people in their desert often show great trust and faith in God.

But there are other kinds of desert. The mystics and other writers reveal to us how they felt empty in life and sought to find God and some deeper meaning. The stories often show that God seems more absent than present in such experiences. But these people are attracted to God and can't let go of seeking God, union with God, love of God. I think this more describes Jesus in the desert. I picture Jesus needing time alone to reflect on who he really is, to know and accept his identity and his mission. He had to face the contradictions of wild beasts and angels. He probably thought through what he was called to in proclaiming the kingdom of God and he realized that he would have to defy a kingdom of empire, greed and power. Did he understand what peril he was accepting into his life? Perhaps many of us in a busy, noisy, high-pressured world, bombarded with materialistic and consumeristic messages may need some desert in our lives too. We need to know God and know ourselves.

What does this have to do with Lent? Many of us have spent Lent in past years in getting busier, doing more things and saying more prayers. However, we need time and space just to be with God and myself. So I advocate doing less, not more during Lent. Don't be running to church if that just adds busyness to your day. Be quiet and listen. Simply let God gaze on you as you gaze on God. If there is something to give up in Lent, it should be that which keeps you busier and deprives you of silence, of serenity. Have you perhaps been running away from God, from relationships? Maybe silence makes you uncomfortable. Maybe really facing yourself is disturbing. Maybe your desert is full of wild beasts in your heart and in your memory. Trust God who will send the angels to accompany you. Jesus was not alone in the desert. Neither are we. Don't be afraid of the dark nor the silence.

The desert experiences of our life balance our need to be with our community in prayer and our call to serve the needs of others. They are all important in our call to be human and also divine.

I have a little poem by the fourteenth century Dominican mystic, Meister Eckhart. He helps us to accept the deserts and the darkness in our lives.

"Some people think that the purpose of life is to find rest, but I say this: if our heart is grounded in God, you'll never be content with

being at rest; you'll always be striving to find God in all that is, whatever it is that you are experiencing. And above all in things that might seem alien or strange to you. To seek this, in darkness, is higher than attaining peace, because as you do, little by little you'll find yourself grasping God in everything that is, which is true freedom."

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