

Why The Desert?

Why do we find ourselves with Jesus in the desert this morning?

What is going on with these encounters with the adversary of God, this one we may call the devil or Satan or Lucifer?

What is at stake in this seemingly God forsaken place?

At first glance it seems that Jesus is struggling with the three most common temptations that face each of us.

The temptation to be well fed: "turn this stone into bread!" so you never have to worry about hunger again.

The temptation to be rich: "Bow down before me and you can have every kingdom in the world!" so you can be fat and happy all the days of your life.

The temptation to be a celebrity: "Throw yourself off the temple and God will miraculously save you!" and people will run after you for your autograph, and admire your picture on the cover of People magazine.

These are the very common temptations we each of us face in one form or another as we try to muddle our way through this life, as we struggle with our budgets, as we wonder whether we will be comfortable in retirement, as we worry what the gal or guy sitting next to me really thinks about me.

But going a bit deeper, what is happening in the desert may be about those things, but not only those things.

The interaction between Jesus and the devil is also about power.

The power to create bread, and therefore to become a source for hungry people to be fed, a power that is often used to manipulate the people, to dominate them, to enslave them.

As in the famous story of the Grand Inquisitor when Jesus returns, in a small Italian village in the 1500's, "He came softly, unobserved, and yet, strange to say, everyone recognized Him" as he set about healing people, even raising a small child from the dead.

The Cardinal, the Grand Inquisitor, who enforces the rules of the faith, promptly arrests Jesus, and confronts Jesus about his return:

"You offer people freedom, but we give them bread, and people will always choose bread over freedom."

Which leads to the second temptation about power during this struggle in the desert, the power to rule over others.

Worship me and all of these kingdoms are yours to command.

Whether it's an abusive husband or a tyrannical boss or an uptight city councilperson or the president of the United States, the urge to rule over others, to impose our will and make them submit, through force or coercion or sweet talk, is a siren call for so many.

Third, and the most tempting power of all, the power to command God to act.

"He will save you if you throw yourself down from the temple heights!"

We see this power on display in what's called the Prosperity Gospel, this demented form of Christianity that says "God owes me!"

As one columnist puts it, "The gospel of prosperity turns Christianity into a vapid bless-me club, with a doctrine that is little more than spiritual

magical thinking: If you pray the right way, God will make you rich.”
Cathleen Falsani, The Washington Post.

So perhaps this time in the desert isn't only about common temptations, but it is also about power, how we seek it, how it corrupts us.

And like he does with the common temptations, so he does with the temptations to power.

Jesus, because he is following a different vision, rejects these temptations.

But I think something else is playing out in the desert this morning.

Something much more profound than merely rejecting common temptations, something even more profound than walking away from the lure of power, something that is instead cosmic and fundamental to the entire fabric of creation.

Today, in the desert, that age old question, “What came first, the chicken or the egg?” — is at stake.

Not literally the chicken or the egg, but the fundamental ‘what comes first’ question — as in, what comes first, the material world or consciousness?

Our science teaches us that it all began with a big bang, and from that came matter, and eventually from all that matter came us, with our big brains, and from our big brains comes consciousness.

According to science, since the brain creates consciousness, when we die, our consciousness dies too.

Which is why we have wars and greed and racism and all the other evils of humanity, because something in us says: this is all there is, so grab what you can while you can because it's not lasting long.

That's Satan's view, and thus the focus on fame, fortune and power.

But what if consciousness exists **before** the big bang?

What if consciousness **causes** the big bang?

What if consciousness creates matter, uses matter, occupies matter (like the brain) but is not constrained, controlled or limited by it?

Isn't that the great drama playing out in the desert this morning?

The devil insists that this material world is the source and summation of all life, and dares Jesus to agree.

Jesus however sits in the truth that this world is only a way station, that spirit and thought and consciousness exist before, and independently of, this material world, and will continue after all that is material is transformed into the promised new heaven and new earth.

These two ways to understand reality bring us to a fork in the road.

They set before us profoundly different ways to live our lives.

And it forces us to reimagine what we think our faith is all about.

Christianity has come to be seen as a private relationship with a far away God, who, if I cross certain "T's" and dot certain "I's" promises I will secure a never-ending condominium in the sky when I die in the sweet bye and bye...

But that's not what Jesus is about.

"The Christian Faith is not a set of personal values or spiritual preferences, it is a claim about the very nature of reality." Murray Rae.

That, as Paul comes to see so vividly, Jesus “is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation.

Through him all things are created, in heaven and on earth ...

He is before all things, and in him all things hold together.” Col. 1:15-17.

And thus we are invited to see that through compassion and self-giving, even self-emptying, which leads to forgiveness of self and others, we begin to peek behind the curtain of what seems to be real and glimpse the ultimate discovery — that all that is — is not only connected, but is indeed One.

It allows us to at long last come to understand that “the cosmos is fundamentally and primarily alive ... and that Christ, through the incarnation, is rooted in the world, even in the very heart of the tiniest atom,” even in the vast expanse of interstellar space. T. de Chardin.

It was none other than Thomas Aquinas himself, the great doctor of the church, who declared that in Christ, “God becomes human **and humans become God**, sharing in the divine nature.”

Which, I know, is hard to believe these days.

Looking around at the world as it is often leaves us shaking our heads and wondering if anything faith says is true.

And yet, “our age and the age of the first century, when Jesus walked those dusty roads, have more in common than we think.

Both times can be summed up as cosmically scared, frightened ages, caught under principalities and powers where tiny little human beings just know that they cannot do much, that they are not in control, that they are just trapped” Krister Stendahl. modified.

But we are not tiny little human beings.

We are the very image of the living God, co-creators with the God who is in all things, guides all things, and loves all things.

“Divinity is the enfolding and unfolding of everything that is.

The divine is in all things, and all things are in the divine.” Nicholas of Cusa, modified.

This is the great drama playing out in the desert today.

It is a drama that demands an answer from us, just as it demands an answer from Jesus.

Shall we claim our inheritance as children of God, as beloved participants in the consciousness that exists always and forever, or shall we exchange it for some shiny beads: beads like money, fame, security or power?

This is Lent.

What answer shall we give?

+amen

