

Led by the Spirit

First Sunday in Lent, Year C, 9th March 2025

St Leonard's Denmark, Alison Kershaw

Psalm 91.1-2, 9-16; Luke 4.1-15

***Through the written word and the spoken word may we know your Living Word,
Jesus Christ our Saviour, Amen***

From the dazzle of Transfiguration to the sombre mood of Lent – isn't life rich! We are called to experience it all and embrace the lessons of both light and darkness. Since Advent we have followed Luke's gospel describing the birth, baptism, and early ministry of Jesus. Then last week, we jumped ahead to celebrate the Transfiguration on the mountain – so we might carry that light and the intention to listen to the Chosen One into our Lenten journey, with unveiled faces. But at this point, on the first Sunday of Lent, we backtrack to fill a gap in Luke's sequence – to just after Jesus' baptism. Between the baptism and today's text, Luke inserts the ancestry of Jesus and tells us he "was about thirty years old when he began his work." (Luke 3.23) Luke then picks up his story, "Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness ..."

Jesus' baptism and his transfiguration are pivotal moments – in both instances, the voice of God owns him as the Beloved or the Chosen One – his identity and purpose are made clear. But also, in both instances, Jesus must move on - he must arise from the waters and go into the desert wilderness, and he must descend from the mountain onto the plain.

Likewise, we might have experienced a great immersion in the Spirit, a cleansing of mind and heart, and a moment of intense clarity and sense of newness. Or, as Revd. Sue said last week, hopefully we might all have had at some point in our lives a transformative mountain top experience, perhaps a mystical encounter, or a knowing of great love, deep joy and peace – a moment in which we wish we could dwell forever.¹ But then ... life carries on ... we might find contentment on the plain, but who can say they are a complete stranger to worries, heartaches, or the challenge of living a loving and ethical life this complex, and often troubled world? We can dare to hope, however, that what we experienced in those golden moments will carry us through, fill us with hope, and give us strength and the ability to create joy.

As we travel across this plain of life, we are bound to encounter from time to time, and at crucial moments, a tract of desert or wilderness. Not a peaceful, soul-restoring kind of natural retreat, but an exposing and comfortless kind of place. We may be *driven* there (the word used in Mark's gospel) compelled by circumstances that seem beyond our control – whether this be illness, relationship breakdowns, bereavement, overwhelming anxiety, or loneliness. Or we might allow ourselves to be *led* in this place (the word used by Luke) because we know there is something that needs to be wrestled with, processed, or discovered, or discerned. Jesus is about 30, an adult, and at a great turning point. His 40 days, as well as echoing the 40 years of the Israelites being tested in the wilderness, might be seen as a rite of passage to garner courage and strength, a formational time to grow in self-understanding. We also have many turning points in our lives – times when we need space and time to reckon with our calling, or situation, perhaps to ponder what comes next for us, or to simply find peace with where and who we are.

Lent is an opportunity to intentionally engage with, or to intentionally enter into this wilderness space. It began with Ash Wednesday's reminder of our mortality and fallibility, and the call in Matthew's Gospel, to go, as it were, inside. To close the door behind us so we might converse with God "in secret." (Matthew 6:1-21) This is a call to prayerful self-scrutiny – not making a show of piety but coming face to face with our ourselves. Ironically, by going 'inside' we may also be entering, Tardis-like, a wilderness – a vast, empty, and wide-open stage for our testing.

Which brings us to the three temptations or tests that are thrown Jesus' way over the 40 days - dramatized in Matthew and Luke by an encounter with the devil. When I was a child, a scripture teacher visiting our school scared the living daylights out of the class with her fundamentalist understanding of Satan lurking behind doors

and Angels waiting to catch us if we fell down the stairs (almost as scary a thought!) I had nightmares for weeks. We don't of course have to believe in some sort of unholy being or entity pitted against God to recognise the power and reality of the evil that humanity is capable of. This is personified in the devil testing Jesus for some all too human 'vices' and weaknesses.

One of my favourite commentators on the lectionary is Debie Thomas on the *Journey with Jesus* website. She suggests the three temptations can also be seen as "three invitations to trust God's love in the barren places of our lives."ⁱⁱ The first test concerns hunger. Jesus is famished and the devil provokes him to prove his divine nature and sate his hunger by commanding a stone to become bread. "One does not live by bread alone" replies Jesus, citing Deuteronomy. We hunger for many things and are fed by many things – but magic tricks do not feed our soul. Jesus, like Moses and Elijah before him, (Exodus 34:28, Deut 9.9, 1 Kings 19.8) does not refuse the test of fasting. Of our own hunger, Debie Thomas says that hunger for the things we lack or elude us can "gnarl and embitter" us. "Hunger in and of itself is not a virtue; it's a classroom. To sit patiently with desire — to become its student — and still embrace my identity as God's beloved, is hard. But this is the invitation of Lent. To learn that we can be loved and hungry at the same time."

The second test concerns ego. The devil lures Jesus with worldly glory and authority purchased by capitulation to himself – that is, to such negative forces as greed, exploitation and narcissism. Again, Jesus cites Deuteronomy, "Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him." – serve only the good. Debie Thomas asks: "Can our lives as God's beloved ones thrive in quiet places? Secret places? Humble and obscure places? The uncomfortable truth about authentic Christian power is that it resides in weakness. Jesus is lifted up — but he's lifted up on a cross. His power is the power of self-surrender for the sake of love."

The third test concerns vulnerability. It also concerns the temptation to test God, and the misuse of Scripture. The devil quotes Psalm 91 which we heard today, goading Jesus to prove he has the literal protection of the Lord who will send angels to bear him up if he throws himself down from a height. At a youth Easter camp, I once witnessed some Christians forming a rather dangerous human pyramid to prove just this – I can still see the frightened young woman trembling at the top - it was clearly in the days before Safe Church! In their literalist zeal they overlooked Jesus' response to the devil –again citing Deuteronomy: "Do not put the Lord your God to the test" – for Psalm 91 is not about *testing*, and demanding proof and protection, but *trusting*.

We sometimes think that if God loves us, we will be kept safe from all kinds of harm. We sometimes think if we only believe hard enough, God will come to our rescue in a physical sense. We may know the Spirit's healing power, but "if the cross teaches us anything," Debie Thomas writes, "it teaches us that God's precious ones still bleed, still ache, still die. We are loved in our vulnerability. Not out of it. We are the children of a God who accompanies us in our suffering, not a God who guarantees us a lifetime of immunity. Why is this good news? It is good news because we are also the children of a God who resurrects. There is no suffering we will ever endure that God will not redeem. The story of humanity is not a story that ends in despair. It's a story that culminates at an empty tomb, in a kingdom of hope, healing, consolation, and joy." Our time in the wilderness is not to test God, but to know ourselves as beloved sisters and brothers of the risen Christ. We may want to test ourselves with honest questioning, or by simply seeing if we can remain quiet for a time and just listen, as the voice on the mountain top bids us – "This my Son, the Chosen One, listen to him." (Luke 9.35)

So, as we begin our Lenten journey toward Easter, let us give ourselves the gift of time: Time to listen, time to ponder the invitations we may encounter in the wilderness, and time to entrust ourselves to mystery. Time to still the destructive voice, to sit with hunger, to set our grasping ego aside and be empty, to know our vulnerability and yet trust that the Spirit that leads us through this place will fill us and lead us out of it. Let us give ourselves time – not just a passing thought – but a good long and slow time – a season - to dwell in the secret yet wide-open spaces of our hearts. Amen

ⁱ Sue Lodge Calvert, *The Transfigured Jesus*, <https://www.companionsontheway.com/post/the-transfigured-jesus>, Transfiguration 2025.

ⁱⁱ Debie Thomas, *Barren Places*, <https://www.journeywithjesus.net/essays/3336-in-the-barren-places>, 27 Feb 2022