

Lent 1 and The Sacrament of Holy Communion,  
Feb.21, 2010  
*Luke 4: 1-13*  
**'A Time of Temptation'**

This week, I found myself 'tempted' to begin with a Canadian writer to whose work I often return. Yielding to temptation led me, like Luke, to the wilderness. Boy, wind, prairie: in *Who Has Seen the Wind*, elements of a vast landscape become ways of glimpsing aspects of God.

*'All around him the wind was in the grass, with a million timeless whisperings...*

*'Prairie's awful, thought Brian, and in his mind there loomed fearful images of a still and brooding spirit...'*

W.O. Mitchell's writing conveys, one reviewer wrote, a remarkable mixture of straw and manure, but also a lyrical account of what it means to be rooted in wilderness called prairie. I've seldom been as moved by a piece of writing as when I first read Mitchell's account of the young Brian, who seeks in wind and prairie some intimation of God's truth, even through his father's death.

Mitchell's writing about Canadian wilderness may help us understand the story of Jesus in the wilderness, seeking God. Is that because, like Brian, unaware of the wind's power, like victims in Haiti, and elsewhere, we can find ourselves at times in a wilderness where life whips us about? Suddenly, like Jesus, we find we've been taken from the Jordan valley where life is comfortable, to desolation, wilderness.

Ash Wednesday began a Lenten journey to Golgotha, cross, and tomb. Though 'the sun with longer journey melts the winter's snow and ice', in Lent, we live under the lengthening shadow of the cross, Gethsemane's looming darkness.

That is the paradox of our faith. Today we consider fasting and feasting, and pack away our "hallelujahs", knowing their hope is always before us, knowing, too, that we enter Lent's wilderness.

In the Bible, as in many spiritual traditions, wilderness is a place of testing, discovering identity, opening to God. On this first Sunday in Lent, join Jesus

in the desert, with the story of his forty days of fasting and temptation. Lenten worship asks us to hear the heartbeat of our own wanderings, demons, times of temptation, in the biblical story.

Sometimes we talk as if temptation means a choice between good and bad, but choices are often more subtle. The tempter's suggestions to Jesus are not evil. What's wrong with suggesting to a hungry man 100 km from any bagel factory that he make himself a sandwich, if he can render stone digestible? "Tell this stone to become bread." Not a bad idea. Much good could come from changing stones to bread. But Jesus says "No". The bread of life is more than this. The moment's hunger won't tempt Jesus into using God's power for his own ends.

Luke's account shows Jesus struggling with what it means to exercise the power God gives him. Should he use people's hunger for bread or signs to build a power base? What about claiming authority? The Devil asserts control over secular kingdoms: *All that power has been given to me; I can give it to anyone I choose*. Wouldn't it help if Jesus took over?

But Jesus knows something crucial is at stake here: a matter of homage, of worship. As Christians, we need to wrestle with these issues. When we love God, seek to worship God, what does it mean to be a citizen as well of one of the world's realms? What does it mean, in Jesus' own words, to *worship God alone*? Not an easy question to answer, nor a new one. But there are ways to begin the discussion.

In the fifth century, Augustine offered his understanding of the meaning of Jesus' words in his book, *The City of God*. He proposed that Christians hold 'dual citizenship': that is, being citizens both of our country and of God's, at the same time.

If we are citizens of Canada **and** of God's realm, how do we exercise dual citizenship? Given possible tension between the two, how do we 'seek God's will in the work that we do?' Questions for Lent. (MV#65)

Some have written of the poverty of modern spirituality which seems concerned with feeling good about figuring out who we are, without examining our moral responsibility to others and the world. Do we lose something vital when we cut ourselves off from the wilderness journey of the soul? It is in the desert, at night or in the relentless light of day, that we

learn to come home to ourselves, to others and to God.

As we continue to struggle faithfully, lovingly, with issues Jesus puts before us, let us consider questions about ourselves as a worshipping community: What gods other than God do we worship? Do those gods - power, money, stuff – harm the world God has given us? What could this congregation do to convey more fully the presence of God, the holiness of God's creation, in our living? In what ways can worship bring God's realm of love and justice more fully into our nation and our world?

"Whom do you worship?" is the Tempter's real question. Jesus answers: *God alone*. What does that mean for you and for me?

Let us turn to God's table as we begin a journey through Lent's days and desert. We know the life-giving taste of God's grace in cup and loaf. We feel the power of reconciliation when partner, parent, friend or child enfolds us in arms of acceptance. In thankfulness, let us eat the bread of life, and drink together, worshipping God who walks through the wilderness with us.

After his father's death, Brian, the boy of *Who Has Seen the Wind* goes back to his wilderness, the prairie, for a moment of comfort and truth: *People were forever born; people forever died, and never were again. Fathers died and sons were born; the prairie was forever, with its wind whispering through the long, dead grasses, through the long and endless silence.*

God is there and God is here. Thanks be to God.

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