

Shelter

Psalm 91:1-2, 9-16

Luke 4:1-13

3/10/19

Following his baptism, the Spirit led Jesus into the wilderness, where he would be for forty days. Wilderness is a place of bareness, hunger, desolation, sweltering heat, frigid cold, wind and rain. Some of the gospel descriptions mention wild animals. It is a place devoid of shelter.

Physical shelter was not the only need. Jesus faced temptation by the devil. He needed spiritual shelter as well. He faced this challenge after he was physically spent and starving. God had spoken to him at the baptism, but Jesus received no similar communication during his forty days in the wilderness. He must have felt very alone by this point.

And the devil came offering him escapes from his problems.

“Are you hungry, Jesus?” ask the devil. “Just turn the stones into bread.”

“Are you wanting to insure you the world will worship you, Jesus? Just worship me,” says the devil, “and you can avoid the waiting for millennial for your Father’s plan to unfold.”

And finally, the devil comes with this one. “Jesus, you can prove to everyone what God said at your baptism is really true. Just step off the top of the temple and God will let you float down to the ground. Talk about your signs from heaven!”

Jesus responded with scripture, but underlying that response is something deeper. Jesus was responding with a trust in a relationship he had with his Father, even though his Father seemed distant. That trust provided Jesus the shelter he needed to endure the physical pain and to survive the spiritual threats.

When Jesus stepped into the waters of Jordan, he was about 30 years old. We know from seeing Jesus at 12 in the temple that he treated his relationship with God seriously. His knowledge of scripture and his faith tradition at this young age shows he had been paying attention in synagogue worship and had been actively seeking to grow spiritually. This wasn’t poured into him at birth. This is something he acquired from his teachers. I include his mother and his father in that group. Mary and Joseph taught him much about his faith.

One of the gifts of Lent is time to focus again on the spiritual practices. Taking time to renew Bible study, reenergize our prayer life, and reconnect with the church are ways we can

follow the example of Jesus. In so doing, we are learning how to find shelter when the storms of temptation and despair arise.

The readings for today invite us to go with Jesus into the wilderness. They should also remind us that many are already there. Many of our sisters and brothers are already struggling with the desert in their souls. Perhaps that is your reality today. Perhaps you are wondering where you can find shelter. Jesus' sojourn in the wilderness does not distant Jesus from us. It makes him very much like us and reminds us that he has experienced our sufferings, our hurts, our times of lostness. Today you may need shelter and Jesus knows that need.

While some might read the story and think we don't face anything as difficult as what Jesus faced, many Christians can tell you that is simply not true. Many have helplessly watched loved ones suffer and been tempted to despair. Many have experienced the long, dry periods when God seemed to no longer speak and they wondered if God really existed. Many have gone from moments of great joy and blessing to suddenly find themselves abandoned in the wilderness, forgotten by others and feeling as though God has forgotten them. Many weep tears of mourning that seem to have no end.

Developing a trusting relationship with God, where we can find shelter in moments of trial, takes time and energy. God does most of the work, but that doesn't take away from the work we need to do.

There is no substitute for spending time worshipping God where we hear the amazing stories of how God acts. We learn to praise God through song and trust God in prayer. And we gain comfort and joy in the presence of sisters and brothers of the faith.

There is no substitute for opening God's word, be it the good old fashion printed version of the Bible or an app on our phone or a recorded version where we hear the words read beautifully. In any of those forms, thanks to the Holy Spirit, those words drill down into the depths of our beings, changing our spiritual DNA.

There is no substitute for prayer – and all the forms of prayer are good. Laments that tell God why how we are hurting. Petitions that lift up our needs and the needs of others. Thanksgiving that lists the blessings we enjoy and offers praise for those who bless us. Be these eloquent and poetic or mumbled runoff sentences, all of them are conversations with God that help us grow to trust the one who provides us with shelter in the storms.

One of the challenges we face as 21<sup>st</sup> century American Christians is that we read scripture from a very individualistic vantage point. We read the story of Jesus suffering in the

wilderness by himself and we paint him a hero and think that's what we are to be as well: individual, strong heroes standing in the face of temptation and fear against the trials of the wilderness.

But the first Christians, when they heard this story of Jesus, would have taken comfort in something else. Christ acted for all of humanity and so he did stand alone in the wilderness. For the first Christians, who had been united by the Spirit after the resurrection, they understood something very important. The church, as a body, was now called to walk the path that Jesus walked. The church, as a body, was called now to be a witness to the world of what it meant to face temptation, to endure the wilderness, to face the despairs common to all humanity.

Yes, there were times that early Christians found themselves isolated in prison, enduring persecution alone, or facing individual temptation. But those Christians knew to cry out and if another heard that cry, help came. There is another discipline that is important. We need to ask one another about our journeys and we need to find ways to share where we are struggling.

For Lent, we can give up ignoring each other's hurts and we can give up hiding our own pain. Brene Brown, who has written extensively on vulnerability and our need for connection, says this.

“One of the greatest barriers to connection is the cultural importance we place on ‘going it alone.’ Somehow we’ve come to equate success with not needing anyone. Many of us are willing to extend a helping hand, but we’re very reluctant to reach out for help when we need it ourselves. It’s as if we’ve divided the world into ‘those who offer help’ and ‘those who need help.’ The truth is that we are both.”<sup>1</sup>

Do you hear that? We don't belong to either team helper or team receiver. To be truly connected to one another we are to be both helpers and receivers. We should seek shelter in the storms of life with one another. We should give shelter to one another when the storms rage. We go into the wilderness together as church to give and to receive, to support and to cry out.

I want to say a word about a ministry that we probably don't acknowledge enough as a place where that very kind of sheltering takes place. The talk around the tables at Sip N Chat's is more than news and friendly gossip. At times folks have been able to share freely with one another the struggles that are occurring. Shelter is offered and comfort and support given.

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<sup>1</sup> Brene Brown, <http://www.oprah.com/own-super-soul-sunday/excerpt-the-gifts-of-imperfection-by-dr-brene-brown/5>

In addition, for this Lenten season there will be the chance to take up some of these spiritual practices together at Sip N Chat. It is with joy I share with you that a group of church members are offering you some simple questions for table conversation that will invite you to delve deeper into your relationship with God and build trust with God and with one another. While it's meant to be refreshment, this kind of practice also helps us learn about shelter.

We all have moments we need shelter. Somedays the temptations revolve around the simple but important elements of life like basic necessities. Somedays the storms of life tempt us to give up completely. God is working to teach each of us to seek shelter in the comfort of the Spirit. And God is teaching our church how we can give shelter to one another.

We can learn to trust in God. We can help one another learn that trust. We can be shelter and comfort and we can find shelter and comfort. We can lay hold of the psalmist's promise:

Those who love me, I will deliver;  
I will protect those who know my name.  
When they call to me, I will answer them;  
I will be with them in trouble, I will rescue them and honor them.  
With long life I will satisfy them, and show them my salvation.

Amen.