



St. Paul's Episcopal Church - Delray Beach, Florida  
1 Lent - Year C - February 20/21, 2010  
Romans 10:8b - 13; Ps. 91:1-2,9-16; Luke 4:1-13  
Preacher: The Reverend Canon William H. Stokes, *Rector*

*Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved....(Romans 10:13).*

In the Bible, the wilderness, the desert, is often a place of encounter, where relationships with God are forged and clarified: think of stories of Moses and the wandering Israelites; of Elijah and the still small voice. On the first Sunday of Lent each year, we always hear one of the Gospel accounts of Jesus' temptation in the wilderness. It turns out to be yet another instance of a time when a relationship with God was forged and clarified. It was Jesus' relationship with the Father.

The forging and the clarifying of the relationship between Jesus and the Father came only after an alternative possibility was placed before Jesus and he rejected it. How often human beings come to crossroads moments, when we must choose who we are and what will be about. At times, this involves choices -- sometimes moral choices -- that are diametrically opposed.

Temptations were placed before Jesus immediately after he had an extraordinary personal experience of divine revelation: the divine revelation that came at his baptism when, according to Luke, "*the heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended on Jesus in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, 'You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased'*" (Luke 3:21-22).

It was an Epiphany for him....It was a turning point moment. It was so powerful and so momentous, that, in the power of the Holy Spirit, it drove him out into the wilderness, out into the desert, so that he could ponder that experience and explore the implications it had for him; implications that could be interpreted in more than one way, as the temptations placed before him by the devil make clear.

What are we to make of this mysterious figure, the devil? How are we to understand him? In his *Interpretation Commentary* on Luke's Gospel, biblical scholar Fred Craddock offers a helpful insight about this: "The scriptures variously characterize the power of evil in the world: tendencies within ourselves; a personal being outside ourselves, apparently a powerful angel gone astray; a cosmic power; and organized forces arrayed against the will of God for the world." In whatever images or concepts," Craddock writes, "Scripture agrees with experience that there is in us strong opposition to love, health, wholeness, and peace."<sup>1</sup>

Craddock observes, "Being committed to the way of God in the world does not exempt one from the struggle. In fact, it is those who are most engaged in the way of

God who seem to experience most intensely the opposition of evil...If Jesus struggled,” Craddock asks, “who is exempt?”<sup>2</sup>

Commenting specifically on the passage we read for today’s Gospel, Luke’s account of Jesus’ temptation in the wilderness, Craddock writes, “Give the tempter his due: the timing is perfect. Jesus has not preached a sermon, cast out a demon, or healed a sick person. He is alone and hungry in the desert, poised at the edge of his ministry. What will be its nature and shape? We may surmise that Jesus is really struggling with what it means to be about God’s business...”<sup>3</sup>

As Luke tells it, the devil mounts his attack on three fronts. The first attack is at the most primal level: “Jesus, you are famished. Turn these stones to bread. Use that extraordinary power God has given you to take care of yourself. You are the most important thing. You can take care of others later, feed yourself; feed yourself first...feed yourself now....” Jesus answered him, “One does not live by bread alone” (paraphrase Luke 4:3-4).

Then the devil led him up and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. And the devil said to him, “*To you I will give their glory and all this authority; for it has been given over to me, and I will give it to anyone I please. If then, you will worship me, it will all be yours*” (Luke 4:5-7).

What an audacious claim. On what basis does the devil make this claim? Does the devil have that kind of power and authority? Well, whether he does nor or not, whether you understand this literally, or metaphorically, it is clear that many human beings have been seduced by this kind of vision of power and glory, from Attila the Hun to Adolph Hitler. *Jesus answered him, “It is written, Worship the Lord your God and serve only him”* (Luke 4:8).

Apparently, the devil is very clever, and also well-versed in the Bible. As he places the next temptation before Jesus, he wraps it in a biblical quote: *Then the devil took him to Jerusalem, and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, “If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here, for it is written, ‘He will command his angels concerning you,’ and ‘On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone’”* (Luke 4:9 – 11). *Jesus answered him, “It is said, ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test’”* (Luke 4:12).

With that it is over, although Luke concludes on an ominous note: *When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time* (Luke 4:13). According to Luke, that opportune time comes at chapter 22, verse 3, when Satan enters into Judas Iscariot, one of the twelve, when he went away and conferred with the chief priests and officers of the temple police about how he might betray Jesus to them.

As many of you know, Susan and I will be taking a sabbatical in the Fall. A centerpiece of our sabbatical will be our participation in a course offered by St. George’s College in Jerusalem, a continuing education center of the Anglican Communion, called “Ways in the Wilderness” which will take us to a variety of desert locations to experience the biblical and monastic desert first hand.<sup>4</sup> Aware that the Desert experience is to be an integral part of our sabbatical time, St. Paul’s member and close friend, Sherry Fleming gave us a coffee table book this past Christmas titled very simply *Deserts*.<sup>5</sup> It is a stunningly beautiful book with lots of information and extraordinary photographs of deserts from around the world – from the Mojave Desert of North America, to the Sahara and Kalahari Deserts of Africa, to the Sinai of Egypt and the Gobi of Asia.

From this book, I learned about something called, “desertification.” Do you know about “desertification”? According to the book, Desertification is the process of deserts “taking over land that was previously fertile.”<sup>6</sup> The authors state that, “in the past, deserts have grown primarily due to natural processes, but in modern time they are spreading as a result of misuse or neglect by human beings.”<sup>7</sup>

It is worth considering the concept of desertification metaphorically, as a description of a process that is overstressing human beings and threatening the religious and spiritual life of many. Spiritual aridity is spreading rapidly, and claiming territory that was once spiritually fruitful and fertile, especially in the United States and Europe.

Tiger Wood’s public apology on Friday offers a graphic opportunity to reflect on this.<sup>8</sup> Although there has been considerable cynicism mean-spiritedness in the media regarding Wood’s apology and the motivation behind it, I choose to take Tiger Williams apology and request for family privacy more or less at face value. Who am I to do otherwise? No matter his motivation, it had to be an enormously difficult and painful thing for him to do.

What I found most compelling about Tiger Wood’s statement was his acknowledgment of the spiritual dimensions of his struggle. He said, “I stopped living by the core values that I was taught to believe in...I knew my actions were wrong, but I convinced myself that normal rules didn't apply. I never thought about who I was hurting. Instead, I thought only about myself. I ran straight through the boundaries that a married couple should live by. I thought I could get away with whatever I wanted to. I felt that I had worked hard my entire life and deserved to enjoy all the temptations around me. I felt I was entitled. Thanks to money and fame, I didn't have to go far to find them.”<sup>9</sup> If that doesn’t reflect the aridity of our contemporary cultural desertification, I don’t know what does.

Later in the statement he indicated what he felt was needed in order for him to reclaim himself, “I have a lot of work to do, and I intend to dedicate myself to doing it. Part of following this path for me is Buddhism, which my mother taught me at a young age. People probably don't realize it, but I was raised a Buddhist, and I actively practiced my faith from childhood until I drifted away from it in recent years. Buddhism teaches that a craving for things outside ourselves causes an unhappy and pointless search for security. It teaches me to stop following every impulse and to learn restraint. Obviously I lost track of what I was taught.”<sup>10</sup> *Obviously, I lost track of what I was taught...*

Like so many, Tiger Woods apparently fell prey to spiritual desertification, the spiritual desertification so dominant in our culture where so many feel there are no boundaries or restraints, but that people are entitled to indulge themselves in any way they want. For Tiger Woods, it is the Buddhism of his childhood that offers a path out of the desert.

For Christians, it is the Gospel of Jesus Christ, a Gospel which similarly teaches that “a craving for things outside ourselves causes an unhappy and pointless search for security.”<sup>11</sup> *Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also* (Matthew 6:21).

Tiger Woods’s transgressions are at a scale commensurate with his celebrity, and because of that celebrity, his sins are out in the open for all to see and judge. But he is not alone. How many people today stop living by the core values that they were taught to believe in? How many continue to engage in activities they know are wrong, but

convince themselves that the normal rules don't apply? How many don't give any consideration at all to who they are hurting, thinking, instead, exclusively of themselves? How many feel they deserve to enjoy all the temptations around them, to which they even feel entitled? How many who were once spiritually fertile and strong, have become waste and empty as a result of spiritual desertification?

We have entered the holy season of Lent. It is a time for us to prepare again for the garden glory of our Lord's resurrection but, to do this we must engage the desert in all of its aridity through penitence and fasting, through self-examination and repentance, prayer, self-denial and meditating on God's holy Word.<sup>12</sup>

Engaging in these disciplines halts the advance of desertification that so threatens us individually and as a society. The disciplines of Lent allow for the miraculous to occur, desertification to be reversed, so that, as the prophet Isaiah exults, "the wilderness and the dry land shall be glad, the desert shall rejoice, like the crocus it shall blossom abundantly, and rejoice with joy and singing...and all shall see the glory of the Lord, and the majesty of our God" (Isaiah 35:1).

Let us pray:

*Almighty God, who blessed Son was led by the Spirit to be tempted by Satan: Come quickly to help us who are assaulted by many temptations, and, as you know the weaknesses of each of us, let each one find you might to save; through Jesus Christ, your Son our Lord; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.*<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Craddock, Fred B Luke: *Interpretation – A Bible Commentary for Preaching and Teaching* (John Knox Press: Louisville, 1990), p. 55

<sup>2</sup> Craddock, p. 55

<sup>3</sup> Craddock, pp 55-56.

<sup>4</sup> For detailed information about St. George's College and The Ways in the Wilderness course, see their website at <http://www.sgcjerusalem.org/home.asp>

<sup>5</sup> Miller, David *Deserts: A Panoramic Vision* (Edison, New Jersey: Chartwell Books, Inc, 2006)

<sup>6</sup> Miller, p. 24

<sup>7</sup> Miller,, p. 24

<sup>8</sup> At the time of this sermon, it had been revealed that professional golfer Tiger Woods had been involved in a variety of extra-marital affairs and infidelities. The apology referred to was a public apology that appeared on national television on Friday, February 19, 2010. For text and video see <http://www.cnn.com/2010/US/02/19/tiger.woods.transcript/index.html>

<sup>9</sup> See Wood's apology <http://www.cnn.com/2010/US/02/19/tiger.woods.transcript/index.html>

<sup>10</sup> See Wood's apology at <http://www.cnn.com/2010/US/02/19/tiger.woods.transcript/index.html>

<sup>11</sup> See Wood's apology <http://www.cnn.com/2010/US/02/19/tiger.woods.transcript/index.html>

<sup>12</sup> This is a reference to the exhortation for Ash Wednesday in The Book of Common Prayer, pp. 264 – 265.

<sup>13</sup> Collect for The First Sunday in Lent, BCP p. 218.