

“Terrible and Beautiful”

Luke 4: 1-13, Lent 1/C

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Lynne M. Dolan

We have entered the Lenten season initiated with the unsettling invitation to consider ones’ own mortality. With the imposition of ashes, we receive a tangible sign of our humanity. “From ashes you have come, and to ashes you shall return.” Lent is a time to consider what it means to live between the already and not yet, what is and what is to come, life as we experience it and the life that Jesus calls us to live when we are most faithful, open and attentive.

We will be using a resource for our Lenten study and sermons in Lent entitled “The Hardest Part: Hurt we Carry, Hope we Find,” written by the theologian, writer and historian Kate Bowler. This first Sunday, she invites us to consider both that which is terrible and beautiful of our lives. Her theme for this week brings to mind the children’s book many of you might remember called “Alexander and the terrible, horrible, no good, very bad day.” In one day, many tragedies befall this young man but in the end the love and care of people in his life get him through. Every season of life presents us with both the terrible and the beautiful. It is how we respond that matters. I look to my faith, colleagues, those whom I love and the ancient stories to lift me out of what sometimes feels like a morass.

Luke invites us to journey with Jesus into the wilderness at the very beginning of his ministry. Not yet dry from his baptismal soaking, Jesus full of the Holy Spirit was led into the wilderness for forty days. He knew that before he could begin his ministry, he needed time away to get his head and heart together. So, in order to fully embrace this life to which God had called and anointed him, Jesus goes to the wilderness alone to pray, ponder, listen, wonder and to let go. Taking time away for prayer, renewal and reflection would become a central component of Jesus’ ministry.

As we discern our collective future, we might do well to set aside time for prayer and contemplation. This may encompass both time alone and time together. God does not call us to do this transformative work alone but rather with like-minded faithful people who trust that God has anointed and empowered us for such a time as this. Engaging in contemplative, prayerful work on a regular basis will change the way we approach our discipleship. Too often we think of this as a luxury however we know that developing and exercising our spiritual muscles is no less important than being physically fit, eating a healthy diet or getting a good night’s sleep.

Today we hear about Jesus’ time in the wilderness and the ways he responds to the Tempter who seeks to draw him away from his mission. In the wilderness, Jesus faced the same kind of pain, suffering, and temptations that all humans face. Throughout the Bible

the metaphor of wilderness is used to describe uncertain and unpredictable seasons of life where we realize there are forces in the world that we can't control (illness, natural disaster, loneliness, fear, to name just a few.) This lack of control may threaten to undo us. This tempter is not cloaked in darkness but engages openly with Jesus enticing him to prove his divinity with a variety of challenges.

I suspect we have all had moments in our lives when it felt like forces beyond our control were influencing the choices we made. This is a frustrating and terrifying feeling. Kate Bowler, reminds us that when we understand that we live each day inside forces we cannot control, that is when “the beautiful and the terrible” as she puts it, become so much clearer to us. The cultural pressure to be cheerful and optimistic at all times has taken a toll on our faith and our emotional well-being. But, she wonders, what if we could find better language than forced positivity to express our hopes and our worries? How and where do we experience both the terrible and the beautiful and know that through these experiences, we are more than conquerors as Paul puts it.

Jesus provides us with a witness and language for our own encounters with the tempter. More often we speak of encounters with the holy. What a coup it would be for the tempter if he were able to derail Jesus' ministry before it even begins. After spending some time fasting and praying, Jesus is vulnerable. In fact, we are told he is famished, both physically and emotionally. It is at such times when our resources are depleted and our defenses are down that the tempter thinks he has an opening. When we are grappling with the forces we cannot control and wondering where we can find God in the midst of it, the tempter steps in to offer what we might think are reasonable alternatives to our struggles. Just accept my invitation to feed oneself, or to self aggrandizement, or to a distorted sense of power and all will be well.

Perhaps we can understand why *we* would be tempted under such circumstances, but why was Jesus tempted? The preacher Fred Craddock says, “temptation indicates strength, not weakness. One is tempted only to do that which lies within one's capacity. The greater one's capacities, the greater one's temptations. The fierceness of Jesus' desert struggle is testimony to his power.” Each temptation Jesus faces is a metaphor for temptations we too might face. The devil will not likely cajole us to literally turn stones into bread; however perhaps you have been tempted to act in self-serving ways against what seems to be the will of God. The devil won't likely tempt us to bow down before him in order to rule all the kingdoms of the world, however we know what it is like to experienced human lust for power and dominance. We are not likely to be tempted to take a spectacular leap from the top of say the Prudential Center and think that no harm would come to us, however we all long at times to be noticed or valued.

Every day we make choices that have both real and lasting implications. To whom do you turn when you face temptation? Who is your voice of reason? Who keeps you grounded when you need to make life changing choices? We are not often as clear-headed or decisive as Jesus was. We need people we trust to help us battle temptation. I submit there are forces at work in the world that seek to lure us away from our mission as

disciples. People who claim an allegiance to Christ who act in ways that are decisively un-Christ like. The tempter speaks in a language that sounds like truth but whose intention is to lead us as far away from the truth as possible. The tempter counts on our lack of spiritual fitness to deter us from doing what is just and right and good. He counts on our lack of courage or resolve to do the right thing.

I attended the Super Saturday event yesterday where The Rev. William Barber, Bishop Barber, gave the keynote address. Bishop Barber is a warrior for justice, serving the church as a pastor for more than 30 years. He is the founding director of the center for public theology and public policy at Yale Divinity School and a leader poor people's campaign, a grass roots effort to bring awareness to the pandemic of poverty in our nation and to work for change to remedy it. He was in Washington this week with a group of faith leaders who went to the Capitol to pray. They were denied the ability to do so and in fact, were told that even bowing their heads would be taken as an act of aggression. I wonder, is this the work of the tempter trying to deter and defuse the witness of faithful people?

It is the tempter's mission to lead us away from God's mission to stand with the poor and speak truth to power, the very witness for which Jesus was preparing himself in the wilderness. The Tempter tries any which way he can to get us to follow after wealth and fame and power at the expense of our calling to give voice to the voiceless and to seek justice for those whom the world wishes to toss aside.

We live in a time where we seek to reconcile the way things are with the way we envision them to be. In a conversation with the writer and educator Parker Palmer, Kate Bowler discusses what Palmer calls "the tragic gap." He understands this to be the time between what is and what we imagine life could be. She clarifies that they call this time tragic not simply because what is happening is sad but because it is inevitable. We all live inside forces we cannot control. Tragically, perhaps, it is part of being human. There are forces in our families, our workplaces, our churches, our nation that are seemingly out of our control. How then do we respond?

Parker Palmer observes that so often we fall into what he calls corrosive cynicism where we cannot imagine any acceptable way forward and resign ourselves to what we think is the inevitable outcome. Or we succumb to irrelevant idealism where we try to convince ourselves that no matter what is happening, all will be well regardless of any evidence to the contrary. Sometimes we call this toxic positivity.

Both of these responses, he admits, serve to flip us out of the gap. Yet the only way through the gap is to faithfully face each day, each challenge and each disappointment by moving forward. Every step we take, every gesture of kindness or resistance matters. As Palmer says, we do these things because it counts. It matters. No social change, cultural transformation or healing from a tragedy happens in one fell swoop. Change, transformation and healing happen one tiny step at a time. Sometimes it takes generations of faithful, consistent, actions before we shrink that gap. But together, through the power of the holy spirit and as beloved community, we keep moving.

There are times when we can't imagine a way through this wilderness or moments when we feel the Tempter has the upper hand. We wonder how God could possibly use us to transform our world when we see ourselves as hopelessly broken. Yet, it is precisely the brokenhearted, the wounded, the ones who have faced our own struggles and survived who are most qualified to do this work.

Parker Palmer imagines the heart breaking in two ways. One is to shatter into a million little pieces never to be put back together again. Or conversely, as a muscle that breaks open again and again, each time making it stronger, more supple and resilient. It is like a runner's heart that is conditioned to take the stresses and strains of race after race. Brokenheartedness is not a deficit, but part of the human condition. We experience brokenheartedness, some more than others perhaps, but we are not defeated. We have been here before and made it through. We will do it again.

How then do we make it out of the wilderness stronger and more able to face what the world throws at us? We do it by submitting to the process of prayer, reflection and witness. We do it together in sacred community where we accompany each other through and beyond the wilderness. We live in ways that send the Tempter packing. We pray continually for those who are suffering the most in these tragic times and we commit to living our faith as authentically as possible. We remember, as Bishop Barber reminded us yesterday, that faith without a conscience is no faith at all. We are no match for the Tempter when we join Jesus in the challenging yet essential spiritual work in the wilderness. Then on the other side, when that good long time is over, we will be ready to face the terrible and the beautiful and trust that all will be well. May it be so. Amen