

St. Andrew's Episcopal Church  
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Seasons of Creation #3: Wilderness  
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“God doesn’t give us more than we can handle.” A common saying. Perhaps you’ve heard it many times in your life, or have even spoken it yourself. It’s a saying I’ve always pushed back against from a place deep within my gut, not necessarily understanding why, until I studied theology, and then I knew why. My image of God doesn’t include someone sitting upon a throne in heaven, doling out bad things to people at opportune times, with the purpose of disrupting or destroying their lives, always attentive to the balance of good and evil in their lives at any particular moment, so people can be just on the edge of the good— or worse yet, bringing on the bad thing in life to selected people at the worst possible moments of their lives, just when they are starting to turn things around, or when they are spiraling downward.

My image of God is a flow of love, a source of desire for goodness for each part of the created world, a pull deep within each one of us for wholeness, and an inherent life-force reaching toward a rich and abundant life designed for everyone, lived within the healing embrace of Christ.

So how would I, how do you, reconcile this image of a God who looks at us through eyes of love, with the God conjured up in this popular saying that seems to imply God is actively involved in bringing bad things into our lives?

I’m not sure why we say, “God doesn’t give us more than we can handle.” Do you? Maybe it’s because when our lives are hard, and we feel out of control, our deepest yearnings are for someone or something to be in control, and even this if implies that God hands out the hardness of our lives, we’re willing to attribute that to God, rather than to simply acknowledge that our lives are out of our control.

Or perhaps it is to give ourselves a spiritual pep-talk, to bolster our strength to get through whatever difficulty we are enduring. If God thinks we can do it, then, by God, we can!

Or maybe, because it’s the only way we can figure out how we can bring God into our deepest, darkest times. Maybe we so desperately want God to be a part of our lives during times which test us, that any type of participation we can attribute to God is good.

Now, maybe that’s the key – maybe behind that almost flippant statement that “God doesn’t give us more than we can handle” is the deep desire that God be a part of the pain of our life.

Now, THAT’S something I can actually believe to be true! Who wouldn’t desperately want God to be a part of our lives’ struggles? The only people who wouldn’t are those who think God is incompetent, untrustworthy, or uncaring. But for those of us who can stretch our way into believing that God is to be trusted, then for us, the struggles we encounter can become

transformational. For if God is within them, there is a chance for change. We can find that we can be changed for the better, we can come out the situation stronger, with a clearer sense of who we really are, what really matters to us, and what we are to do in this world, and we can imagine God's involvement in the situation making a difference. The chance to change. That's the invitation that is in the statement, "God doesn't give us more than we can handle." If God is a part of it, of either drawing us into experiences that shatter us at our core, that break open the façade that we are in control of everything, or make us look at life from a new perspective, or if God merely "sits with us" in the pain, then there's a chance for change, toward clarity of who we are and what we are to do in the world.

This is exactly what happened to Jesus as the Holy Spirit led him into the wilderness for a time of testing and temptation, as we heard in our gospel today. We understand Jesus not as something separate from us. Because of the incarnation, we can enter into what Jesus did, truly following him, not just honoring who he was. Our text today tells us that the Spirit draws us into times of testing, not because God desires Jesus to have hardship in his life, or us to have hardship in ours, but so that we can come out of the time of testing and temptation stronger, as Jesus did, in our sense of identity and purpose in the world.

There are no surprises in our gospel story today. We expect that Jesus will be able to resist the devil, who is often described as one who attacks, misleads, deceives, diverts, discredits or slanders. Jesus is God incarnate, so of course, we know, or at least want to believe, God's power of goodness will be stronger than any temptation offered by the force of evil.

But what I think we often fail to see is the transformative power of the wilderness, the time when we feel stripped to the core, as Jesus was, for 40 days and 40 nights, for Jesus was changed through the experience, and therefore we can be also. Jesus comes out with a clearer sense of his identity and purpose, and he's **famished**, not just physically, but spiritually, he is ravenous to begin his ministry. That's the piece we are invited into. Every time we want to say, "God doesn't give us more than we can handle", we are invited to look into the possibilities of this situation, for us to know what we care most about. If we don't go into that place of self-reflection or exploration of how God desires us to be when we get to the other side, then, I believe, we've missed the point, and we're stuck in a relationship with a God who purposefully doles out bad things in our lives, rather than a God who sits with us in them and draws us into new life. We must ask ourselves the poignant question, "What are we famished for?"

I often speak of a cycle of deconstruction and reconstruction in our spiritual lives, the pulling apart of what is known or predictable or under our control, (the deconstruction part,) and the subsequent re-assembling of the pieces into something new - the reconstruction part. I believe God is the force behind both and that the two processes happen simultaneously. Which is to say, God doesn't wait until things fall apart in our lives to begin to pay attention to us and then to imagine how to put them back together, in a new more life-giving way, but rather, the pulling apart and the reassembling happen at the same time. Our text today and our focus this Sunday on this wilderness time in our spiritual lives introduce to us a whole other step - that moment when we realize we want more, that we yearn for something that feels more complete; when our hearts are

filled with a hope for a fullness we have only yet seen a glimpse of; when we imagine a better way of life, born from the ashes of what was. Christian living is a straining forward for what is yet to come, not what was.

These moments of yearning, of passion, of hope, are liminal times, when we can identify an anticipation of being changed into something new, when we know we will hardly recognize ourselves when we look back after this moment in time, that somehow the angst will be gone, the worry will disappear as the mist rises from the valley in the early morning, when something new will define who we are. Certain moments in my own life have this liminal quality, when I could anticipate a brand-new beginning – my wedding day, the days of my children's births, when I became a mother, and which changed my life forever, when I had a greater clarity of my identity and purpose, or my ordination as a priest, when I suddenly realized what God had in mind for me all along. These are liminal times, when there has been a yearning for something new to embrace, when I have felt more aligned to God, when I have been aware that something even more spectacular than I could ever imagine awaited me. You have those moments too. They are awaiting you, because the God I believe in doles out pregnant opportunities to each one of us, all the time.

Jesus, in his time in the wilderness, learned a few important facts about himself and the God he was manifesting on our earth: God would satisfy his needs for what he was hungry for, God would keep him safe, and God's view of domination and prestige was the reverse of the world's - one of humility and servanthood.

Jesus, through his temptations, shows us that it is when our lives are difficult that we chose who we will be. Like Jesus, there will be times when we are hungry, when we are tempted to doubt God's faithfulness, times when we are tempted to reach for power or align ourselves with those who do, so we can feel safe, rather than live and make decisions as Jesus did, as God' servant.

And yet, there are important times when we will be famished like Jesus, when we will ask ourselves the questions Jesus did: "Who am I to be?" "What will matter most to me?" "What does God have in mind for me?" "Where am I starving to make a difference in the world?" These are such important questions for us to ask ourselves, for it is within these answers that the Kingdom of God will emerge.

Many of us know from real experience that it is through times of trial and tribulation, or even temptation, that there is an opportunity for us to become our best selves. Now my experience, when people are in a place of distress or testing, their first response is not always their best response. So sometimes, finding our real selves requires patience, of ourselves, or of others, to allow God to do God's work. But God will do God's work. I deeply believe this.

And walking through and out of wilderness does come down to trust that God is God, and we are not. We can trust God to do God's part, which is always and forever loving us into wholeness. Then we need to ask ourselves if we are doing our part, are we being trustworthy to God, are we joining our imagination with God's as to what we can do with our lives, and then are we boldly living that way. Our faithfulness means we can see into another's person's heart and find truth;

that we can become a presence of healing balm in that raw and hurtful situation we see unfold before us; that we can release the power of love, the shalom or wholeness each of us yearn for with those we encounter.

So, in times of trial, we can see an invitation to perceive what God is already creating anew - that's the reconstruction part - but we can also see an invitation to identify our own yearnings, and that's the transformative part, when we do that reflective part in our soul, to see if our yearning is aligned with God's, because that's our ticket out of wilderness, aligning our purpose with God's purpose for us, for then we can move onto River Sunday, when all becomes recreated and new.

I will still bristle every time I hear someone take comfort in the statement, "God doesn't give us more than we can handle", because it still conjures up in my mind an image of an old man in heaven, doling out good or bad things in our lives, like one may deal a deck of cards, some getting the wild cards that protect them from the natural occurrences of the game of life, while others deliberately getting the ones which make you lose your turn or start all over - but when I hear that phrase, for I am sure I will because it's part of our popular, yet un-analyzed theology, I'll say to that person, "Yes, that's right - God has drawn you into, and is here with you, in this bad time, so how are you using this time to be clearer about who you are, stronger about what you are to do in the world, and deeper in your trust in God's providence, as Jesus did, when he was drawn into the wilderness by the Spirit?"

That's right. And the point is that it should leave you hungry - starving to trust God more, to know yourself more, to yearn to become more of what God has in mind for your life, and be clearer in what you are to be doing in this world. "How is that working for you?" I'd ask. For being Christian is not a passive stance of taking life as it comes, but one of finding the chance for change hidden in each adversity, discovering what we are famished for, discovering what wholeness we want to work toward that will make the world a better place, and for holding before us the glimpse of the fullness God is offering us that can become our beacon of hope. Amen.