

REsisting in the Wilderness: Jeff's Reflection

The world has changed since Carol and I and the Worship Team began planning for this season of Lent.

When we met several weeks ago, we decided there would be a theme leading us throughout Lent, the theme of:

aRE you REady?

We chose that theme thinking about Lent as a time for Christians to reflect on their faith and get ready for Holy Week and for Easter.

We were also thinking of faith communities considering a return to in-person worship and gatherings after two years of living with COVID restrictions.

aRE you REady?

Are we ready?

During the past two years, faith communities have had to adapt, we have had to change – many of us have used technology and social media and YouTube and worship recordings in ways and with a frequency that we never had before.

We have been church without often being physically together. But we have still been a community that cares for and about each other, and for and about this world.

We have experienced a kind of exile- exiled from being able to live and interact as we had done before.

So are we ready – ready to return from pandemic exile, ready to reimagine how we go forward being church?

So, **aRE you REady?** seems like a good question and a good theme for Lent.

But in the past several days we have been shockingly- reminded that **aRE you REady?** is a life and death issue for many people in this world.

That is true for the people of Ukraine as they watched Russian assemble military forces on the border and then invade Ukraine and bomb Ukraine.

We had decided that each Sunday during Lent would have its own 'theme word' – a word based on the scripture lesson for that Sunday – a word that would begin with the letters 'R-E'.

The word for today is 'REsist'.

We are seeing the word 'REsist' lived out in the courage of the people of Ukraine.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky has become a new face of heroism, courage and integrity as he has called upon Ukrainians to REsist the invading Russian forces and to fight for the freedom and safety of their country. Zelensky has become a voice of hope and challenge as he has called on all nations to support Ukraine in this war.

I suspect many of us have been moved to tears, have offered prayers, have attended rallies or offered financial support. I suspect many of us are amazed and awed by the courage and determination of people in Ukraine who are putting their bodies in the way of armoured vehicles and Russian soldiers; and who are REsisting and fighting and refusing to give up their land and their country.

While I want to say some words about the theme of 'REsist' as it relates to today's scripture reading from the gospel according to Luke, I do so aware that the image that comes to my mind now when I hear the word 'REsist' is the image of President Zelensky and the images of the faces of Ukrainian civilians taking shelter and patrolling streets, telling Russian soldiers to leave, putting their bodies in front of armoured vehicles, and also images of buildings throughout the world lit in the yellow and blue colours of Ukraine's flag.

So let us begin our season of Lent reflecting on the theme of 'REsist.

Lent is a season for reflection and for remembering the stories that shape our faith, to remember who we are as companions of Jesus, the risen Christ; a time for reflection and remembering and for reimagining who we are as Christ companions in our world today.

We begin this Lent with the biblical story often referred to as Jesus' temptations in the wilderness.

In the Gospel according to Luke, after being baptized, Jesus is praying, and the heaven opens, and a dove descends and Jesus hears a voice from heaven -meaning a voice from God - that says, "You are my Son, the Beloved, with you I am well pleased."

We are told that Jesus experiences the Holy Spirit, experiences God with him, and that this Holy Spirit then leads Jesus alone into the wilderness.

Wilderness is a physical place. Wilderness is also a spiritual state of being.

In the Jewish tradition, wilderness recalls the story of exodus, of slaves leaving the economic domination rule of Pharaoh in Egypt and going into the wilderness. The story tells of the people spending 40 years in the wilderness while they come to know who they are – no longer slaves but children of God.

They spend time in the wilderness, fearful that this barren, seemingly inhospitable place cannot sustain life; fearful that Moses has led them out to die in the wilderness. In the wilderness they learn that God offers life even in the most unlikely of places. In the wilderness they are blessed with manna, with quail, with water from rocks.

And in the wilderness, Moses speaks to them of commandments, and of laws, and of becoming a community different from Pharaoh's Egypt, of becoming a community of welcome and compassion, a community that cares for the poor, the orphan, the widow, the foreigner, a community seeking the well-being of all.

So, as Jesus is led into the wilderness, we expect this to be a time for Jesus to decide who he is and how he is to follow God. Just as those exodus slaves had to decide between Pharaoh's world order and God's world order, so Jesus would have to decide between the world order of the Roman Empire or God's world order.

According to Luke's account, Jesus makes that decision by 'REsisting' temptations, resisting options presented by the 'devil'. When we try to picture this scene, we don't need to picture Jesus sitting on a rock listening to someone in red tights with a pointy tale lecturing to him. 'Devil' refers to a spirit other than the spirit of God, a spirit, an impulse, a voice that offers a story different than God's story.

This spirit, this Devil, makes three offers to Jesus, all dependent on who Jesus knows himself to be, whom Jesus trusts himself to be, who tells Jesus who he is.

Two of the temptations begin with the words "If you are the Son of God. You have heard a voice at your baptism, Jesus, saying that you are Son of God, but do you really think that is so, are you even sure that you heard that voice – are you really the Son of God!"

"Why don't you make sure? Why don't you just reassure yourself that **You Are the Son of God?** If you are, there should be some perks associated with that title."

After all, it was well known that someone in that world already had claimed that title – first Julius Caesar was declared a god, then Augustus Caesar was declared son of God, and then Tiberius Caesar was also called son of God. And if you looked at them, you could see that 'Son of God' came with lots of perks – they ruled, they conquered, they had palaces, they gave orders and others obeyed. They were victorious and to them was given the praise, the glory, the honour.

There are many, many interpretations of the meaning and implications of the temptations in the wilderness of each of them. I encourage you to read and reread the story for your own interpretations and insights.

As I read the passage this week, I was struck by how Jesus is tempted to be safe and protected.

The term 'Son of God' uses male language. Today we use more inclusive language to

speak of 'Child of God'. In the time of Jesus, one of the implications of the use of 'son' was that it was traditionally the 'son' who inherited the family estate, farm, wealth. The son was the heir. So, to be the Son of God was in one sense to be the one who inherited God's spirit, God's authority and blessing, God's world.

The first temptation is for Jesus to turn the wilderness into his personal fast-food restaurant. "If you are special, then you 'should hunger for nothing.' God fed the exodus people in the wilderness. God doesn't want you to be hungry, to have any discomfort, but you don't really need God to feed you – do it yourself: turn stones into bread. If you are the Son of God, then you can do whatever you want with this world. This world exists to feed your appetites, to satisfy your needs; exists for you to manipulate it to whatever end you desire."

Jesus replies: "It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone.'

Temptation two – the Devil has satellite technology and shows Jesus all the kingdoms of the world – Rome, Egypt...all of them. Today Jesus would be looking at Ukraine, the United States, Russia, Canada, Great Britain, Israel, India.... all nations.

"Okay Jesus, see all these nations, all their glory: they have borders, land they control and possess, standing armies, rulers, riches, they are players in the game of world power and wealth. I will give you their glory and their authority – their control, their rule – for all this has been given to me, and I can give it to anyone.

"If you want to put God's program in place, there's no better way than to be in charge of all the power, all the weaponry, all the tools of communication and propaganda."

The second temptation is to be in control, to be able to shape the world however you wish, the power to make this world be whatever you want it to be. The second temptation is power.

"Oh," says the Devil, "be sure to read the fine print at the bottom of the contract. All this will be yours...if you worship me." Hmmmm – if Jesus is in control of all the nations, but Jesus worships this Devil, then won't this Devil still be in charge of all the nations? Jesus replies, "Worship the Lord your God, and serve only God."

And the third temptation. Jesus finds himself standing on the edge of the roof of the temple. At its tallest point, the temple stood 740 metres (2,428 feet) above sea level. "If you are the Son of God, nothing can harm you. God will protect you. Prove it. Prove God is in your corner. Jump. Hurl yourself towards the ground...and let God save you. God will send angels to protect you, to catch you, to keep you safe."

To which Jesus replies, "It is said, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'

At which point, the devil departs, to wait another time and place.

If you are the Son of God...

If God has really chosen you to in some way represent God...

If God really loves you...

Then... shouldn't you expect to have what you want, to succeed at what you do, to be safe and protected and never worry about anything disrupting your life...

Jesus had to discern how he was to live as God's beloved.

Part of discerning was to resist the voices that called him to a path of power, privilege, success, and control.

We all have voices – voices that define us. Voices that tell us that what matters about us is other people's opinions, is how successful we are, how many honours we are given, how much praise comes our way; voices that say we are defined by what we have, how influential we are, how comfortable we are; voices that tempt us to believe that we are defined by only our worst moments; voices that tempt us to believe that we defined by only our best moments...

Voices to be REsisted if, like Jesus, we are to find our identity as one beloved by God, as a son, daughter of God.

Because Jesus is perhaps the most famous person in history, because Jesus has so influenced art, music, literature, social systems and structures, we might think that in fact Jesus did end up with success and power and privilege.

But I don't think that's what we see as we read the stories in the gospels. Jesus never held any public office. He didn't have wealth or even, seemingly, a permanent home. He wandered from village to village. His companions were a diverse group – fishers, tax collectors, people whose names we know without knowing much else about them, men and women who somehow trusted that being around Jesus brought them somehow closer to God.

He healed people – a miracle worker, but not one who made any money from his healings, not one who eradicated disease from the world. He gave attention to the lame and those who had no social standing or influence; he told some stories. He faced criticism about his willingness to eat with apparently the wrong kind of people.

And no angels stopped the nails from being driven into his body. No angels saved him from being beaten, from being executed.

Jesus made a choice in his wilderness – a choice to REsist the voices that said he had to become the next world superpower, and instead chose to be loyal to the God of exodus and exile; chose to trust that there is another Life present in the life of this world,

the Life of God, a Life that in our struggling-to-be-articulate way we call Love, a Life that says that for humanity's sake, for creation's sake, for our personal sake, for God's sake, we must embrace a way of non-violence and seek healing and seek to be sources of healing.

Jesus made a choice to follow the way of God, even when that way did not seem to assure success as it is normally measured and displayed.

Jesus made a choice, that he would be with God and that God was somehow found in and with people in their pain, in their brokenness, in their weakness.

As we begin Lent, Jesus tells us that God is with us in our wilderness times – and I think we all have wilderness times – times of experiencing brokenness, anxiety, grief and loss.

Jesus tells us that God is with us in the deepest and truest blessing of our humanity – that each of us a child of God.

Jesus tells us that as we make this way through this world as God's children, we are to be healers and blessers of each other.

The Dutch priest, Henri Nouwen, once wrote that in his experience, the people who were most significant in his times of wilderness were not the people who offered advice or solutions or even cures, but those who shared his pain by touching his woundedness with gentle and tender love.

I think, that in his wilderness, Jesus chose to be with the God who did not always rescue him but was always with him. Jesus chose to be with the God who somewhere, sometime beyond the grief and pain of Good Friday, would again bring another Life, a new life, a resurrection life into this world.

Jesus REsisted the temptations of power and control and success in order to bear God's love in the world.

As I record this, Russia continues to invade Ukraine. We do not know how this will end...but I believe that what will be remembered in the years to come, will not be the power of Russia, but the spirit of resistance and courage of Ukraine.

Ukraine is in a wilderness time. This world is in a wilderness time. In this time may we rediscover who we are as God's children, and may God lead us to be healing and blessing in this world.

For this is God's world, and we are God's beloved children. AMEN