

SERMON: 2 Lent, Year C

Genesis 15:1-12, 17-18, Philippians 3:17 — 4:1 & Luke 13:31-35

Preached Sunday, Feb. 28, 2010 at St. Philip's, Brevard by RDF

Here's one for your list of top reasons to be an Episcopalian:

Episcopalian preachers don't give their sermons silly titles, which then go up on a lighted signboard in front of the church. (That's another reason, come to think of it: we don't have lighted signboards, either). But if that were part of our tradition, I have a title for my sermon this morning that isn't too silly. I'm calling it "The View From the Desert." I wanted it to sound a little mysterious, somewhat exotic, and hopefully compelling. But I'll let you be the judge of that by the time I'm finished.

So, here it is: "The View From the Desert." The view is from the desert because that's where Jesus is. Remember last week? After his baptism, the Holy Spirit compelled Jesus to go to the desert, where he spent 40 days, fasting and being subject to temptation. And, since it's Lent, we're also in the desert — if we choose to follow him there. In point of fact, you might be in the desert already and not even know it. If you imagine the desert to be a place of desolation and testing, many people have been there for some time. You can find yourself in such a place either by choice or by default. I will be so bold as to suggest that this is where we are as a nation. Consider the state of our culture and our politics and our overall well-being. Once you do, you may conclude with me that we're in a place of spiritual desolation. In so many words, we're in the desert.

The desert is a compelling place for many reasons. First, you can see things more clearly. You're away from the cluttered landscape of trees, buildings and other things that can obstruct your view. Second, there are few places to hide. Unless you dig a hole and bury yourself, you're there for the sun and the vultures and anyone else to find. Third, you are vulnerable in the desert. It's hard to protect yourself from the wind, the rain and the sun. Being there reminds you that we human beings really are fragile; that we're not invincible or immortal. Fourth, you can't be a solo act. In the desert, you have to accept that, in order to survive and flourish, you need other people and a higher power. Very few people can make it all alone in a place of desolation. If God thought that Jesus needed the angels to come and minister to him in the desert, what do you think that means for the rest of us?

Finally, there's one more reason to appreciate the desert. It may be the one place where God has an easier time reaching us. I say this even though I believe God is always with us. When I have trouble finding God, I assume that I'm the one who needs to look more carefully or have my eyes checked. But in the desert, we see the landscape and the movement of the Spirit more clearly. This may explain why it was in the desert that Jesus recognized the presence of evil and confronted it directly. Jesus couldn't hide there — but neither could the evil one.

In some form or another, all our scripture readings today come from a place of desolation. Abraham was in such a place, both physically and emotionally, when God spoke to him in a vision. He and Sarah were barren, so Abraham had trouble believing the amazing promise of God: that they would have descendants as numerous as the stars in heaven. And, yet, Abraham accepted the promise, so God in

turn accepted Abraham's faithfulness as good and righteous. Amazing things can happen in the desert.

St. Paul wrote his Letter to the Philippians from prison, which must have been a desolate place. And yet, perhaps because of his isolation, Paul saw some things very clearly. He saw that the world is divided between those who recognize their heavenly citizenship and those who don't. And he realized that those who suffer humiliation like him will find one day that God has turned their desolation into joy. With his view from the desert, Paul encourages his brothers and sisters to "stand firm in the Lord," and not to turn away from the cross of Christ.

Then we have the Gospel. Although Jesus isn't still physically in the desert, he is feeling the spiritual desolation that waits for him in Jerusalem. He recognizes that Jerusalem is a place that "kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it." He yearns to gather the children of Jerusalem like a mother hen, but they won't go along. Would Jesus be surprised that people who tell us things we need — but don't want — to hear are still rejected and despised? Would he be surprised that the descendants of Abraham still refuse to lay down their arms and be gathered in God's tender and peaceful embrace?

Here's what the view from the desert can teach us. Desolation is not something we usually embrace voluntarily, but it can help us grow closer to God and see reality more clearly. Once we begin to accept solitude voluntarily, we start to recognize the value of the desert. Richard Cecil once said, "Solitude shows us what we should be; [but] society shows us what we are." This is part of the clarity that comes from going to the desert. James Percival may have had Jesus in mind when he wrote, "One hour of thoughtful solitude may nerve the heart for days of conflict — girding up its armor to meet the most insidious foe."*

In the end, we go to the desert because that's where Jesus leads us. Take a look at some of the Stations of the Cross, which I've propped in the windows today. By next Sunday, they'll all be hanging all around us. (The late Earl Kersh of St. Philip's drew these, and our Memorials Committee had them framed recently, thanks to a benefactor in our parish.) Jesus didn't just go to the desert one time for 40 days. He embraced solitude and desolation many times, seeking clarity and the nearer presence of God. It doesn't matter how or why we wind up in the desert. But when we are there, we know that the pioneer and perfecter of our faith will be there with us.

The last word this morning comes from the psalm appointed for today. You can think of it as a prayer from the desert: "Hearken to my voice, O Lord, when I call; have mercy on me and answer me. You speak in my heart and say, "Seek my face." Your face, Lord, will I seek" (Ps. 27:10-11).

*Cecil was an 18th Century English divine; Percival an American geologist (1795-1856). Both quotes from Quotation Park (see quotationpark.com).