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Feb

Mercy on the Wilderness Road

Renewed in Mercy

FIRST SUNDAY IN LENT, YEAR A

The First Sunday in Lent invites us to consider how to set the space for the journey ahead.

REFERENCES

Genesis 2:15-17; 3:1-7

Psalm 32

Romans 5:12-19

Matthew 4:1-11

COLORS

Purple

And suddenly angels ... (Matthew 4:11 NRSV)

That's an odd phrase, don't you think? What an odd image. Angels beaming in like a Star Trek away team. I'm not sure what to do with this or what we're supposed to do with it. There don't seem to be a lot of throwaway lines in the Bible. So, we're supposed to hear something, or see something, or think something. Aren't we? But what?

Frankly, the whole temptation in the wilderness story is kind of "out there," maybe even a little surreal. Matthew says the tempter came to Jesus in the wilderness. But it was at the end of the forty days, so Jesus was weaker, hungrier, and worn out from all the fasting in the desert. Therefore, he was a prime target for this temptation. I don't know how you envision this encounter, or that it matters all that much. Did the questions come from inside Jesus' own head and heart? Or was there someone present, someone whispering in his ear? Was it a hallucination? Was it an in-the-flesh visitation? Can we be sure?

Does it matter? Well, maybe not. Most commentators focus on the nature of the temptations, and rightly so. There is some sermon fodder there. While these particular temptations are uniquely for Jesus alone, they can be broadened into ones we all face. None of us can turn stone into bread, but all of us can think of our own needs first. None of us can survive being flung from a high peak, but all of us can focus on the sensational to the detriment of the faithful. None of us can rule all the nations, no matter what we worship, but all of us can look for the power that comes from taking shortcuts or shady deals. Are these temptations his or ours? “Yes” is probably the best answer.

If we examine Psalm 32, we can see the connections more clearly. The psalmist’s experience sounds like a wilderness wandering. The suffering and wasting away could depict what happened to Jesus in the time before his testing, but there is a curious thing. The source of the suffering is identified in verse four as the God of justice and judgment. The happy ones at the beginning of the psalm are those who are not deceitful, those with no iniquity, those who are forgiven. That is the source of happiness. The source of suffering is the hand of God laid upon the one who is wasting away. But this same God is the source of happiness and healing when confession is made. God is called a hiding place for the psalmist, the protector, and deliverer.

While not intended to be an explanation for all suffering, Psalm 32 lifts up right relationship with God as the source of joy in living. God is merciful. It is in God’s mercy that reconciliation happens, that transparency is valued, that forgiveness is shared. This is the source of the celebration that the psalm presents.

God promises (notice the change of speaker, which is common in the psalms) to instruct, to exhort, to be a presence – “my eye upon you” (Psalm 32:8 NRSV). That’s not a threat, though we sometimes receive it as such. It is, instead, a promise of companionship and support. God is with us in our struggle, in our wandering, in our suffering.

Maybe Matthew got it wrong. Maybe the angelic presence was not sudden. Perhaps it did not just appear after the temptation was defeated. Maybe it was there all along. But Jesus (and all of us, more often than he) was distracted by his ordeal and didn’t notice or lean into the support that was beside him, even in the depths of the wilderness. We are surprised by God, not because God suddenly shows up, but because we finally take the time to notice and invite God into the conversation of our lives. We sometimes are like a horse or mule without understanding, needing a bit or bridle to turn in God’s direction. But we don’t have to be. We can trust in that presence, rejoice in that support, and sing in that mercy, even in the wilderness.

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