



Sermons from Northwood United Church

“Ground us in you”

Genesis 2:15-17, 3:1-7, Matthew 4:1-11

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May the words of my mouth, the meditations of our hearts, and the actions of our lives be acceptable in your sight O God, our strength and our redeemer. Amen

I want to tell you about the landscape of my childhood. I was born and raised in the arid hills of the south Okanagan. grew up in Penticton. Was involved in Scouting, so as a child I clamored all over the back woods and mountains of the Similkimine and Carmi and Shute Lake. I knew the smell of the ponderosa forests, and the alpine meadows around Apex, Nickleplate lake, Headley mine and Brent Mountain. But even more I knew the arid desert of Vaseau Lake where my family bought a piece of land on the lake, and over my entire childhood, build a small home, where I learned to swim and sail and canoe, and where I discovered my love of birds.

Vaseau is the landscape of my childhood and in many ways the homeland of my soul. I go back and know the place. I returned after the massive forest fire that ripped through the hills above the old place and it brought tears to my eyes, so devastated was the land. I canoed the lake early one morning a few years ago and discovered that the Baltimore Oreoles were still nesting where they used to nest 30-40 years ago when I counted them for the Canada Wildlife Service. And as I rest on those familiar waters, something tells me that the place knows me too. If I was to be asked to describe a landscape that means home to me, I think it would be there.

In the Bible, there are landscapes rife with meaning. Think about the Garden of Eden, the place of beginning. Eden is a place of innocence, a place of honesty, where you can be naked and not really know it. It is an idilic place where all is untouched by the hardness, the dilemma, the hurt of life. And you can't live there and live in the real world, but there is a wistful piece of us that longs to go back there, to return to simpler times, to re-create innocence, and we know we can't return to Eden.

Then there is the mountain top. We were there last week, where Peter, James and John, where in cloud and light, they saw the ancient ones talking with Jesus, and they encountered the voice of God again. That moment harkened back to Moses on the mountain with cloud and thunder and when he came down from the mountaintop experience, his face shone. The mountain top is a rare place of holy encounter, moments that change us for the better, moments that we would love to make last but we know we can't live there either. We must return to life, but we do so with a memory of the divine encounter that nobody can take away,

There are other biblical landscapes: the promised land, we go down to the river, we cross to the other side. Each landscape is both a real thing in life and a metaphor for a part of life. And today, we discover Jesus in the most harsh and raw and poignant landscape of the bible, the wilderness. The wilderness is the place where the people went after they were freed from slavery. They wandered there for 40 years. It was the place where they received the Law, the 10 commandments. But it was a stark place, a threatening place, a place where you encounter the harshness of the elements, where you feel your hungers and your thirst, and a place where you yearn for the Promised land. But it is in the harsh and stark elements of the wilderness where their relationship with God is forged, tested and solidified- where they encounter the divine in the barren but beautiful place. IT is the training ground of faith, spiritual boot camp, where all the voices that would have you take the easy way come out to play.

And so when Jesus goes out into the wilderness after his baptism, we know he is in for it. We are not surprised when, after forty days of fasting, he is hungry and thirsty, and he is tempted. The bible personifies temptation in the person of "the devil" or Satan, but after forty days of fasting, I am guessing temptation comes in many forms. You are hungry. Use your resources to feed your hungers- turn stone to bread. You are a great person. All this could be yours. Feed your ego and let your power accumulate for yourself. Make a show of your power and even turn it on God. All these temptations are an attempt to get Jesus to use who he is and his life's energy to serve himself rather than the great purpose for which he is here. The wilderness is where he faces all the lures: the lure of comfort, of power and the greatest of all, the lure to serve other gods. But did you see what he did at each temptation? He faced each lure and unmasked it- showed it for the empty shell that it really was. Stone to bread. No. That would trivialize what this is about. Accumulate power. No political and personal power comes and goes. Test God. No. That is what an immature faith does.

We have now begun our Lenten journey, which begins in the wilderness, and ends at the cross. This journey follows the story of Jesus as he struggles with the powers of his day, as he tries to hold on to the Gospel way even though the religious leaders and political leaders of his time threatened him. We follow the story of his circle of friends, his disciples as they try to understand and to follow. It is our own 40 days in the wilderness.

What throws you off your gospel game? What knocks you off the path you were always called to walk. What lures you into being not your true self? By and large in our culture we avoid discomfort, avoid questions that make us uncomfortable. We want life to be as easy as possible. And yet, in avoiding discomfort we also lose the opportunity to develop sturdy souls, spiritual lives that can face the powers of the world and of our lives and unmask them. So I want to invite you in the next 40 days between now and Easter, to a time of intentional reflection and spiritual practice. I am not going to prescribe it for you, but instead invite you to think about the things in your life that throw you off your spiritual, gospel game. Is it time- life gets so busy that you just cant seem to focus? Is it your giving muscles that need a workout, something special to give to in this time that can renew your sense of making a difference in the world? Is it prayer or spiritual practice. You may have succumbed to the temptation of habits that dont serve your soul. What powers challenge you, in your life. This is an opportunity to face them, to try to unmask them, and to renew your gospel focus. It is time to seek and find solid ground, to pray that of all the things we could be grounded in, all the things that come to us and tempt us, that God might ground us in God's self. Come to the wilderness, and become grounded in the sacred. Amen