

REFLECTION March 6, 2022

In Thomas Merton's book, *No Man is an Island*, he says, "The greatest temptations are not those that solicit our consent to obvious sin, but those that offer us great evils masking as the greatest goods." Whatever you believe about the nature of evil, this is undoubtedly the case for most of us. We are like Jesus in the sense that justifications for our choices to give in to temptation abound and very often make sense. We are being savvy, or prudent, or acting in alignment with our cravings, which just so happen to align with the values of a capitalistic culture. We do not have to subscribe to the Gordon Gekko/Wall Street ethos that "greed is good", but with truth mimicking fiction and characters who resemble him being the focus of so much of our media, our own avarice can be assuaged as being far less than theirs and 'normal' or 'understandable' in comparison.

While we may not be shown all the kingdoms of the world and promised power over them, many of us have a complicated relationship to power. For some of us we have been taught that we have no access to any kind of power and so we operate in passive ways that deny our ambition. We deny the divinity that resides within us and clobber those around us with our victimhood. It is here that we are most comfortable, most powerful. Alternatively, some of us have sought for power in the world; power and authority have been our safe places--in our lives we have cultivated little fiefdoms where we loom in presence and require loyalty. In our families, in our workplaces. Some of us, as we change life stages, may recognise how much power we had and how we perhaps misspent it, perhaps consolidating it with aims larger and more incidious than our own, aims that seem less important as we age and contemplate our mortality. I think we all suffer when we do not engage a transparent discussion about what power is and how it operates in the micro settings of our own individual lives, but also in the macro as we bear witness to how power operates in the world. Pretending we do not see how power functions in our lives, communities, society or simply that "being a nice person" lets us off the hook simply won't do. But it was in the epistle Ephesians, attributed to Paul, but likely written by his followers that we recall the wise warning that it is not with flesh and blood that we struggle, but with powers and principalities. Forces bigger than ourselves, be they governments and institutions, or demons (sometimes it is hard to differentiate!) require us to assent. And this is where our faith and our discipleship offer a true path of power. We can choose God first. We can submit to the Universal Power of Love, the Stitcher of Galaxies, the Prince of Peace, the Holy Breath. It is our choice to make.

It is easy to not really feel comfortable worshipping God. I mean, it is, at this point, profoundly countercultural for us to submit ourselves to the Mysterious Holy One. Belief is openly ridiculed. Faith is falsely made akin to idiocy. Submission is embarrassing right? Worshipping must be passe by now, no? And if it isn't, then surely submission to God in the wilderness where we are desperate and no one can see us is one thing, but in the modern cities we inhabit, in Jerusalem?

On Wednesday, we read scripture that asked us not to contort our faces as we fast, not to pray aloud seeking to appear pious, but I wonder if the equivalent ask for those of us in the mainline church isn't to roll our eyes quite so much at the suggestion that we might be truly saved and led to resurrected life abundant by the God who is enfleshed? Perhaps our Lenten walk requires our prophetic and profound witness of how cloaked we are in sackcloth and ashes as despotism, self-interest, violence, and naked disregard for human life and flourishing run rampant.

Jesus witnesses. Jesus reveals. And he demonstrates by reciting the Hebrew texts in the face of the Diabolic One that human life is more than a collection of cravings. Our hunger, though real, cannot express the longings of our souls, which are groans too deep for words. And oh, how our souls ache in these days. No amount of feasting, accumulation, wealth, status, power, decadence, distraction, busywork can drown out the longings for something deeper, something more, something meaningful and resonant. Church, I want you to remember the text today. The passage in Luke's gospel that we consider and meditate upon, the story of Jesus' temptations, begins by telling us that he is filled with the Holy Spirit. And led by the Holy Spirit to the wilderness to experience these temptations. This was not him being forsaken or left alone or estranged from the Creator and the Sustainer, but rather imbued in their power, power that exceeds all other false powers. Power that teaches in trials. Power that requires us to fast and pray and be alone sometimes. So that we may see what lies within. The paradox of wilderness is that it is a desolate place that is fecund with possibility. And Jesus' experiences there offer us a reminder that we do not come nose to nose with evil by ourselves. It is no accident that we encounter evil, either. As the text ends, there is always an opportune time for it. Perhaps disguised as good, or as power, or as a justified craving. Church, I want you to remember that we need only to call out the name of our God and our advocate is there. I also want you to remember that it was the Spirit who led Jesus into the wilderness. A life of following God means we will need to call out to her. Our scriptures are clear on that. There is no guarantee that our ongoing conversion into disciples and followers of the Jesus way makes our lives easier or more comfortable. In fact, all indications point to the opposite! And though evil will surely try to convince us otherwise: There is no better way than the ways that set free. Our freedom is in putting God first in our lives. There is no better way than the holy ways of Love. There is no better way than together. May we walk the wilderness of our lives in the assurance of these truths and in trust of the One who goes with us. Call out when you need. We do not walk alone. Amen.