

40 in the Wilderness

Sermon March 1, 2020

By Michael Turman

More than 600 years ago, Julian of Norwich wrote about a vision:

*“And God showed me a little thing,
In the palm of my hand,
Round like a ball,
No bigger than a hazelnut.
I gazed at it, puzzling at what it might be.
And God said to me,
“It is all of creation.”
I was amazed that it could last
And did not suddenly disintegrate
And fall into nothingness,
For it was so tiny.”¹*

Our lives and all our experiences of joy, sadness, fear, loss or hope are part of creation. Are they so small?

The Judean wilderness is also part of Creation. In today’s reading, the Spirit leads Jesus, following his baptism at the Jordan, into the desert to be tempted. Now, the Judean wilderness stretches south from Jericho along the West Bank of Jordan, beside the Dead Sea. In Jericho, the average annual rainfall is 145 mm, which is about a sixth of what we get in Kitchener. Near the Dead Sea, this would be even less. It is very dry and often hot. When you are there and not in an air conditioned

¹ Norwich, Julian. Richard Chilson, ed: *All Will Be Well*. Ave Maria Press, Notre Dame, Indiana: 2008. pg 15-16.;

coach bus, it seems like it just goes on and on, with little shade, moisture or coolness.

Forty days Jesus is said to be in this desert without food - a very long time in such a rugged, lonely environment. Picture sharp valleys, long ago carved out from rock by long lost rivers; tall hills with dry dirt and sand. No trees, small shrubs and grass. In this place, tired, hungry and alone, the tempter comes to Jesus and tempts him to use his divine status in the wrong way: to relieve his hunger, to test his certainty of safety, or to gain worldly power. How is it that Jesus resists these temptations when he is so hungry and tired? If all of creation is merely a ball the size of a hazelnut in God's eyes, imagine how much smaller the human experiences of hunger or loneliness must be? After his baptism, when God's voice declared Jesus as God's beloved son, the difficulty and dryness of the desert seemed insignificant compared to the true satisfaction of God's love.

The forty days that Jesus spent in the desert is mirrored in the traditional church calendar. The season of Lent is forty days from Ash Wednesday to Good Friday, not including Sundays. This recalls to us the 40 days that Jesus spent in the desert, the 40 days that Moses was on Mt. Sinai, and the 40 years that the Israelites spent in the desert. As such, Lent isn't like Christmas or Advent. It isn't meant to call to mind the easy things of our lives. It is a season of dryness—of empty baptismal fonts. Of wandering, wondering, and some kind of solitude. In order to enter this season, the traditional practices of prayer, fasting and almsgiving have served the church for hundreds of years.

Have you ever experienced a time in your life when you felt dry spiritually? When the practices you were used to were leaving you feeling still wanting? In my spiritual life, I find every now and then a season of dryness. A few years ago, when I was working at a church organization, there was a period of intense change: my

supervisor was leaving suddenly, I was caught up in conflict with another leader and I felt like I was falling apart. I prayed as much as I could but still felt alone and afraid. It was a wilderness experience for me. As part of my transition, I took up a new practice: I began training in Aikido. It helped me learn to break my fall, literally, and to respond to the situation in a different way.

The Lenten season and the practices we take up likewise give us a way to walk through dry times, not by avoiding hardships but by heading right into and through them.

A little bit about the practices and what they can look like: the first one is prayer which can be many different things: A daily devotion; an intentional regular quiet time; a walk through the woods; singing hymns. It is to open up the channel with our maker. Fasting or abstaining from something is about removing something we are used to enjoying. Not to become sick or miserable—if abstaining from something makes you ill you need to choose a different practice. It is to help us focus more clearly on what is truly significant. For instance, if you were to give up Netflix for forty days, it wouldn't hurt you, but it might give you new opportunities to practice other things.

Finally, almsgiving or charity is about finding ways to show love or support to others. This could mean sharing some change and a coffee with the person at the side of the intersection; it could mean volunteering time at an organization, or finding simple acts of kindness to do with love. All of these things are meant to come from a place of love rather than burden.

Have you experienced a season of dryness before? Lately? What have you done to help recharge your connection to your spiritual life and practice? Are there any changes or practices that you've been meaning to take up, or habits that you've been thinking to give up for a time? I encourage you to give it some thought, write

it down for yourself, and put it into practice. Experiment if you will, and mark down what you notice.

We return to Julian of Norwich:

*“And God showed me a little thing,
In the palm of my hand,
Round like a ball,
No bigger than a hazelnut. [...]*
*And God said to me,
“It is all of creation.”*
I was amazed that it could last [...]
For it was so tiny.
*And again God spoke to me,
“It lasts, both now and forever,
Because I cherish it.”*
*And I understood that everything has its being
Owing to God’s care and love.*
*We need to realize the insignificance of creation
And see it for the emptiness it is
Before we can embrace the uncreated God in love.*
*We will find no rest for our heart or spirit
As long as we seek it in insignificant things,
Which cannot satisfy us,
Rather than in God,
Who is omnipotent, omniscient, and beneficent.
He is our true repose.”*²

² Norwich, Julian. Richard Chilson, ed: *All Will Be Well*. Ave Maria Press, Notre Dame, Indiana: 2008. pg 15-16.;

Let this Lent be an opportunity to practice walking through the wilderness places in our lives. Let this Lent be a time to observe the insignificance of creation beside the incomparable love of the uncreated God. Let this Lent prepare us to follow our Lord and teacher toward the cross. And beyond that, toward the promise of eternal life that awaits all who believe in the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Amen