

I would like to begin this morning with a few personal remarks. Given that this is my first official visitation to St Stephen's, I would like to express my gratitude for the privilege of serving as your bishop. It is an honor to serve a diocese such as this one, with faithful, courageous, and dedicated Christians such as yourselves.

I would like to thank you, the people of St Stephen's, for your service and for your desire to serve God in and through the Episcopal Church. Thanks to the many of you who serve with devotion on the boards, committees, and commissions of this diocese. And finally, thank you, Father Bob, for your service to both this congregation and the diocese, as well.

It's a new day in the life of the Church – and I mean the Church Universal, not simply The Episcopal Church in North America. One scholar says we are living in the midst of a metamorphosis (a change in form). This is not the first metamorphosis in Church history, as the first big change occurred during the fourth century when the Emperor Constantine declared Christianity to be the favored religion of the empire. Christianity went from being a counter-cultural minority faith to adoption by the empire. And that form of Christianity lasted for 1500 years. Most of us were born and raised in that established church, however informally established. Certainly, we were not born into a counter-cultural or minority movement.

And now we are seeing the second great change in form, as the established church morphs into something new. I believe we are seeing a number of developments, but as we move into this Season of Lent, I would like to look today at one apparent significant change. The Church appears to be moving from a posture of triumphalism (a Church Triumphant) to a Servant Church (a Cruciform Church) inclined to follow the way of the Cross.

Perhaps today's reading from Matthew's Gospel on this first Sunday in Lent points us in that direction. In today's Gospel, we hear that after Jesus was baptized, "he was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil."

Every year on the first Sunday of Lent we hear one of the Gospel versions of the baptism and temptations of Jesus in the wilderness. And certainly, this story is the appropriate reading as we begin our forty-day season of Lent – our own journey through a seasonal wilderness with temptations of its own.

This Lenten experience appears superficially to be an opportunity for each of us to rise to the occasion and meet the challenge of temptation, and beat it in an act of the will. This morning I would like to suggest another way of approaching any kind of wilderness or desert experience.

To begin with, let's look at some biblical stories which we can imagine to be desert experiences – times when people wandered through a wilderness, suffered through the so-called “dark night,” wondered if God was with them or not, wondered: “Can God set a table in the wilderness?”

Of course, there is the story of the forty years Israel spent wandering through the wilderness. There is the story of Abraham, as he climbed a mountain to make an awful sacrifice. There is the story of Job, who watches his whole world fall apart, losing everything including his family. And what about the disciples, after Jesus was crucified? Three long days between death and resurrection: a wilderness.

All of these experiences have one thing in common – one thing in common, in particular. In each case those struggling through their respective desert or dark night don't know the outcome. WE know the outcome, because we've read the rest of the story, but those in the middle of it ... don't know.

For example, in contemporary history: those who lived in the midst of such events as the Great Depression or World War II, probably cannot imagine that the rest of us read that history through the lens of knowing how it ends. And the perpetual knot some carried in their stomachs, not knowing when the Great Depression or any war would be over isn't in the history books. When they were in their wilderness (whatever wilderness) they didn't know how it was going to turn out.

And those in the “valley of the dry bones” now – a critical illness, a family conflict, clinical depression, employment uncertainties, loved ones deployed – you who travel through the wilderness now take each step-in faith, not knowing how it will turn out, praying that God will redeem it somehow.

Those of you in the wilderness now, and those of you who can remember a desert experience or dark night you never again want to encounter, you know the wilderness Jesus entered. Jesus entered the same kind of desert, not knowing the outcome. His forty-day experience was not choreographed. It was not a staged

play. Jesus entered that desert as “flesh and blood” for forty days – famished, vulnerable, and tempted by Satan.

According to Matthew, Jesus faces three temptations. First, while Jesus is starving the devil says, “If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread.” Then, second, the devil takes Jesus to the holy city and places him on the pinnacle of the temple, and says, “If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down; for it is written, ‘He will command his angels concerning you.’” And then, third, the devil takes Jesus to a very high mountain and shows him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor, and the devil says, “All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me.”

Three temptations which Jesus faces and overcomes: He is tempted to change the basic elements of creation – stone to bread. He is tempted to force God’s hand into a guarantee of survival. He is tempted to take political power over all the kingdoms of the world.

Perhaps above all, Jesus is tempted to take for himself superhuman powers – to be something other than human. And Jesus is victorious. He chooses to live in day-by-day dependency upon God, rather than setting himself above such dependency. He chooses a life of vulnerability. He refuses the devil’s offer of power – power OVER the kingdoms the world – choosing, rather, to be at one with God’s people.

And that’s what’s at stake in this forty day trial. What is at risk in this wilderness of temptation is Jesus’ solidarity with ordinary human beings. Will Jesus BE one of us? Will he choose to go through the motions (only appearing to be human), watching from a distance, a demi-god walking the earth, not knowing what it is to be human ... OR will Jesus be one of us? That’s what’s at risk.

And Jesus chooses US. And that means everything to those who are in the wilderness. Jesus has been there. It’s no wonder that there are so many various kinds of support groups for the numerous crises we face. When we are in the desert we want someone around who has traveled that road; someone who understands; someone who knows what others luckily cannot know.

We are not looking for someone who proudly conquered a trial or challenge by their strength and willpower. We are looking for an authentic, vulnerable, human being who knows what it is to suffer. We are not looking for triumphant people who seem unscathed by the world and have all the answers; we are seeking

compassionate people – the word “compassion” meaning “feel with” or “suffer with.”

People in the wilderness today are not seeking the Triumphant Church of old. They seek (and we seek) the Servant Church, the Cruciform Church, of authentic, vulnerable human beings. Vulnerability has more power than triumphalism. Christians gathered here this morning, and people beyond these doors, seek the One Who loves us enough to be one of us: Jesus, the Christ, the One we are called to proclaim and embody in the Name of the Holy Trinity, one God, in Whom we live, and move, and have our being. Amen.