

**Lent 1: Desert lessons<sup>1</sup>**  
**March 5, 2017**

Here we are in Lent.

40 days not counting Sundays and Holy week,  
40 days to prepare ourselves for the central story of our faith;  
the cross of good Friday and Easter resurrection,  
40 days to remember our human limitations and mortality,  
40 days to remember all the other 40-day references in our Bible,  
40 days to enter the wilderness with Jesus and face our own  
temptations.

Not sure about you, but all of that seems rather daunting. Most days  
we're just participating in the lives we have been given to live  
in all of their demands, joys and relational struggles.

But this is the time of year where we are invited to be a bit more  
introspective about it all and we are invited to willingly enter the desert  
wilderness with Jesus.

And sometimes we don't actually choose that desert wilderness.  
Sometimes that wilderness (at least figuratively speaking) is chosen for  
us by life's circumstances,  
but either way,  
this wilderness time has something for us,  
something important for our life,

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something important maybe even for our survival – as individuals, as a Mennonite Church in Canada, as a planet.

Today I want to look at what we can learn from desert wilderness; actual wilderness landscapes.

What can be learned from the wild untamed world of creation (even if in our day there is less and less of the wild and undomesticated world to learn from)?

What can we learn about ourselves and God from fierce and untamed wilderness space?

Some of my reflections today are drawn from Belden Lane's book, *The Solace of Fierce Landscapes*, where he examines our relationship with fierce landscapes through the lens of the early Christian desert mothers and fathers.

To begin I want to remind you of my sermon from a few Sunday's ago when I described a hike in the forest on a dense foggy day where the trees on the horizon grew smaller and smaller before they disappeared into the mist.

In that moment I experienced a bizarre sense of the infinity of the natural world around me and I felt compelled to cry out (silently or internally),

"Is the heart of everything indifference or is it compassion?"

Is God's created order indifferent to us or is the heart of everything compassion?

My answer in that sermon came in the form of catching sight of the neon colours of two little bird-houses – crazy splashes of colour in a grey world.

little houses for birds created by a human who simply wanted to make little houses for birds, nonsensical creative love for birds, in an otherwise harsh, grey and indifferent world. So “yes” to compassion over indifference.

But my question assumed that there was an either/or answer.

In this sermon, my study of desert and wilderness spirituality would amend that to say

that

the created order of the world around us can be completely indifferent to us, but that this indifference can shape in us an appropriate corresponding indifference to the things that don’t matter and help us to attend to the things that do. In this understanding of the created world indifference and it’s opposite attentiveness form a paradox that can give birth to love or compassion.

Let me share a story that explains what I mean.

In December of 1935 Antoine de Saint-Exubery, (famously the author of *The Little Prince*) on a flight between Paris and Saigon, crashed in the Libyan Desert west of the Nile.

He and his companion survived the crash, but were unlikely to survive more than a day without water. Their remarkable story includes a 124 mile desert trek before they stumbled, half dead into the path of a Bedouin caravan who were able to tend to them and revive them.

The desert landscape was completely indifferent to their presence.

Whether they lived or died was of no concern whatsoever to the desert.

“What saved him and his companion were two things. First, [Antoine] was meticulously observant of his surroundings, noticing an unusual

northeast wind, full of moisture, retarding the dehydration of his body and bringing a light dew that he could collect on parachute silk. Second, he remained stubbornly indifferent to the panic, pain and despair which preyed on his mind. Learning to be fiercely attentive, he learned also not to care – to ignore everything unnecessary, everything unrelated to the primary task of staying alive.”(from *Belden Lane’s retelling of the story*) And finally he was miraculously met in that desert by the compassion of the Bedouins who saved him.

The desert where he survived in this way was the same desert of the fourth century Christian desert mothers and fathers who described the same kind of attentiveness and indifference as *agrupnia* and *apatheia*. *Agrupnia* is attentiveness to both external and internal landscapes. For example, attentiveness to shifting weather patterns can keep one safe on desert sand or vast stretches of water. Attentiveness to signs of large predators – of the lion and bear variety - can help one avoid them or prepare for them. Attentiveness to sources of food and clean water can stave off hunger and thirst.

As for indifference, *apatheia*, externals like status and privilege and fashionable clothing soon mean little in a fierce landscape. Internally, one learns to be indifferent to the unhelpful desires that grow in the emptiness of wilderness time and space. The desert mothers and fathers taught that prayerful contemplation helped them to do battle with the desires that arose that were not of God. Prayerful contemplation helped them to focus on God alone so that they could hone indifference to things that sought to harm their souls, like fear, despair, loneliness and love of the wrong things.

And so now let's imagine Jesus in a similar desert wilderness.

We are told that after his baptism the Spirit drove him into the wilderness where he fasted for 40 days and nights, reminiscent of Moses' 40 days and nights on Mount Sinai and Noah's 40 days and nights of rain and the Israelites 40 years in the wilderness. Like these other stories this would have been a time of intense formation and connection with God, and opportunity to learn from the desert its lessons in attentiveness and indifference.

Imagine with me the things Jesus needed to be attentive to both externally in his surroundings and internally.

Of course externally he would have had to be attuned to poisonous spiders and snakes and other dangerous animals.

Internally he would have quickly become attuned to his own hunger and desires.

He had just experienced the high of his baptism, a voice from God, a clear sense of identity as beloved son and with that I imagine he would have had expectations of himself for what that meant or would mean. As I've said, the desert mothers and fathers remind us that one of the first things that result from the deprivation of the desert is the heightening of desire – desire for all that has been left behind at the edge of the desert – desire for security, shelter, beauty, love, and these things ignited in them internal battles or temptations where they sought

to practice, *apethea*, an indifference to any desire that was not first desire for God alone.

And so, Jesus' experience would have been similar.

As he imagined his identity and the ministry upon which he was called to embark,

his desire for relevance, effectiveness and power – all that has no meaning in the harsh landscape of the desert - would have risen before him – seeking his attention.

And so enter Satan, the evil one, the deceiver, who tries to convince him that the path to follow

1, should be miraculous – stones to bread – feed not only our own hunger but everyone else's

2, should be spectacular – throw yourself off of the temple so that others can see how God takes care of you.

3, should be powerful – all the kingdoms of the world can belong to you Jesus if you bow down to me, the tempter says to him.

But Jesus learned the lessons of the desert well – honed by attentiveness to what mattered and indifference to what did not, he allowed himself to be guided in the end by one desire; the desire for God alone.

In response to the temptation to be miraculous, he was able to say, "One does not live by bread alone but by - every word that proceeds from the mouth of God."

In response to the temptation to be spectacular, he was able to say, “Do not put the Lord your God to the test”

In response to the desire to be powerful, he was able to say, “Worship the Lord your God and him only shall you serve.”

The fierce landscape of the desert humbled Jesus and the limitations he learned there equipped him for everything that followed. God and God alone would be the source of everything he did. The indifference and attentiveness honed by the desert landscape gave birth to compassion in him not only for himself and his own limitations but also for others. God’s love of and desire for Jesus and Jesus’ corresponding love of and desire for God alone would accomplish so much more than anything he would have accomplished on his own. The attentiveness that Jesus learned became the attention and love that he was then able to lavish on others.

In contrast most of us mortals, we humans who seek to follow Christ, hate limits (the ones that Jesus learned in the desert).

The story of our hatred of limits is told in Genesis – a few verses of which were also read for us today.

God placed Adam, the first human in the garden and our English version says that he was asked by God to till and keep it. The Hebrew words here, for till and keep are *abad* and *shamar*, that more precisely mean serve it or be a slave to it and protect it. One of God’s key instructions to the first human was to say that we are not the centre of all that is, but

rather a servant of the creation of which we are part. And then God placed limits on this human. God said to this earth creature *adam*, that God had just formed from the *adamah* (earth), “You may eat of all the trees in this garden except the tree of the knowledge of good and evil for on the day that you eat of it, you shall die.” God then made a partner for the first human and together, a few verses later, they do eat of that tree. The two of them do not respect the limits that God set for them. In that moment their knowledge of good and evil, their version of good and evil, opened their eyes to their nakedness and for the first time they experienced shame, and that shame led them to want to cover themselves before each other and before God. God knew that when they sought to be like God, they would not be able to judge as God judges. God judges the hearts of humans. Humans in their limitations judge appearances. And so one of the first things we do when we presume to know good from evil is shame ourselves and each other with our judgments. As Lori put so eloquently in her sermon on sin, we turn inwards, away from God, away from others, away from creation when we think that we have a God-like knowing of good and evil. And in our separation from God and others and creation we, and the creation we were supposed to serve and protect, begins in that day to die.

But the good creation that God made has within it the lessons that we need to learn.

In the fierce landscape of the desert wilderness where indifference to the things that don’t matter and attentiveness to the things that do are most clearly honed,



Jesus, and the desert mothers and fathers who followed him, learned that God alone feeds us, protects us and is worthy to be worshiped.

Out of God's great love for us we are judged by God as loved, lovable and capable of loving if we will only focus all of our desires on God alone and not on our quest to be like God.

And the child of that kind of indifference and attentiveness is love.

In the end, paying lovingly focused attention to God and to each other (including the rest of creation) is all that really matters and in this way the heart of the universe will always be compassion.

There is one more story that I want to share.

One of the Egyptian Desert fathers seeking a sign of divine approval for his long years of monastic devotion was told that his sanctity was nothing compared to that of a common grocer in a nearby town. On going to study this man very carefully, the monk found him occupied with his vegetables amid the noise and hurry of the city streets, attentive to the needs of all those coming to him. Even as night came on, with the people growing rowdy, singing loudly in the streets, the man stayed at his task, helping latecomers with their needs.

In exasperation the monk finally blurted out, "How can you ever pray with noise like this?" The grocer looked around, feeling compassion for the people that made up his ordinary life, and answered very simply. "I tell myself they're all going to the kingdom," he said, "They're concentrating with single-minded attention on what they do, singing songs with all the joy they can muster. See how they prepare for the kingdom of God without even knowing it! How can I do less myself than to praise in silence the God they inadvertently celebrate in song?"

That night the old monk walked slowly back to his cell, knowing himself to have received - from a grocer no less, an important lesson in the craft of desert attentiveness. *(also from Belden Lane's book)*

The most important thing of all is to give God and others our loving attention and the heart of the universe will always be compassion.