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The First Sunday in Lent
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Year A
Genesis 2:15-17; 3: 1-7
Romans 5:12-19
Matthew 4:1-11
Psalm 32

Into the Wilderness...

Good Morning. My name is David Kasievich. I am profoundly grateful to your Rector, Joel, and all of you for extending the invitation to me to be with you today. I come representing St. James School, an Episcopal middle school located in North Philadelphia. St. James School is committed to educating traditionally under-resourced students in a nurturing environment. The school is a community that provides a challenging academic program and encourages the development of the moral, spiritual, intellectual, physical and creative gifts in its students. Your parish of St. George has been a loyal partner of St. James School since 2016.

Today is the first Sunday in Lent. We have begun our forty-day sojourn through the Lenten wilderness. Not a literal wilderness, of course, not here in Ardmore, but a metaphorical wilderness, perhaps even a spiritual wilderness. People often enter this period of Lenten wilderness with some sort of spiritual practice of giving up, traditionally understood to be fasting and not eating meat during the season. Although today it's more commonly fasting from sweets, or coffee, or curse words, or television, or social media.

In the Gospel of Matthew that we have just heard, it says that Jesus was led by the Spirit into that wilderness. I hope that all of us who have taken on a Lenten practice were led by the Spirit in that process. Mark's Gospel puts it a bit differently. Mark doesn't say that the Spirit led Jesus, but rather that the Spirit drove Jesus, a bit more intense language. Being led makes it feel like you've got a choice in the matter. You can choose not to follow the person trying to lead you, but being driven is something against your will. That's something in which you have no choice. And that is the reality of the Lenten wilderness for some, and probably for all of us at some point in our lives. We find ourselves in the Lenten wilderness not of our own volition or choice, maybe not even during Lent. The wilderness of unemployment, for example, or inadequate employment; the wilderness of relationships falling apart; the wilderness of families torn apart; the wilderness of grief over recent or upcoming death; the medical wilderness of cancer, or chronic pain, heart disease, HIV, depression, PTSD, and so many more; the wilderness of fear that permeates our lives in the media and our civic life so intensely these days. Some of us may be in that wilderness right now. Maybe we've been there for a while. Some of us may not be there right now, but we've been there and can remember what it is like; or maybe we'll find ourselves in such a wilderness before this season is done.

There are many people in our society that are stuck in a perpetual wilderness that is not of their choice. The United States is a rich country. But it contains lots of people surviving on incomes more common in developing countries. The consequences of being on the very bottom rung of the income ladder on families' daily life, as well as the long-term life chances of their children, is becoming more well known in our country. In 2015, the threshold for being in deep poverty is an annual cash income of less than \$5,885 for an individual, \$7,965 for a single-parent with one child, or \$12,125 for a married couple with two kids. In contrast, for context, the median household income in the US in 2015 was nearly \$54,000.

I know that this parish of St. George is well aware that our great city of Philadelphia has some horrific statistics around poverty, children and education. We, unfortunately, have become numb to the challenges that face children in Philadelphia. We too often see the headlines – shuttered schools, school shootings, over-crowded classrooms, nurses and counselors no longer available to students, art and music programs stripped from a school or district, students unable to enjoy recess because of fighting on the playground...

Then there are the poverty headlines that we see in the papers...

- Nearly 1 in 4 people in Philadelphia lives in poverty
- More than one-third of all children in Philadelphia living in poverty.
- 41% of residents surrounding St. James School are living in poverty -- more than triple the poverty rate of the rest of the state.
- Almost one quarter of adults in the Allegheny West neighborhood are unemployed.
- Less than 6% of Allegheny West residents are college graduates.
- Our neighborhood experiences one of the highest rates of incarceration in the city of Philadelphia.
- At Strawberry Mansion High School, the nearest neighborhood public high school to St. James School, only 44% of students graduated in 2016. Nationally, the average graduation rate is nearly twice as high.

This perpetual wilderness experienced by our brothers and sisters is certainly not the wilderness of their choice.

Out there in the desert, Jesus did, for those forty days, have connection with others. First it was the devil, that old crafty tempter as we heard in the Genesis reading, trying to build a relationship with him by offering Jesus survival and protection and power. In that Tiffany window, the snake is down there to remind us of that visit by the devil. But not all connection is good, of course, for the price to pay for what the devil offers him is much too steep. Jesus rejects this attempted exit from his isolation.

After the devil departs and Jesus is alone again, in comes another connection. This time the angels, the messengers of God, come to care and support and nurture him and end that loneliness that he is experiencing. These two possible relationships that Jesus was offered out there in the desert are quite different. The relationship the devil offers is a transactional relationship of power and greed: worship me and I'll give you these kingdoms; be in a relationship with me and I will give you stuff. But the relationship that the angels offer has no quid pro quo. It is pure, unselfish love and grace.

The church – such as this very community of the Church of St. George – and, I would say, St. James School (a community-based church school) are among the last few places where people go to gather with other adults and young people in a community. Not just as individuals gathered in the same place but disconnected from each other, as when we go to a coffee shop where no one is talking to one another, but, rather, everyone is on their phones using the free Wi-Fi. There, the people are together, but they are not in relationship, not in community.

But the church and St. James School are places where people are truly in relationship with each other, sometimes crossing boundaries of who we would normally interact with, offering dignity and respect to every person.

In many ways, this is a sermon that preaches to the choir, as that old expression goes, for you all are gathered here today, and you already know that community matters. It matters to you; this community of St. George matters to you, and that's one of the reasons you are here. You are the great resistance to the isolating forces of our day. Every time we show up for each other and engage with each other, we are resisting these powerful forces that are driving people into the wilderness of isolation, as folks who know how valuable relationship is, as a people who worship a God who wanted to be in relationship with us so badly that God came down here to be one of us, to live among us and live our life. We know how important this is, and so it is our task to build community, to build relationships, to build bridges and friendships to help move this world through the wilderness of isolation and loneliness, through Lent, through Holy Week, through Good Friday, and into Easter. Because that is the real Lenten task: to move towards Easter.

At St. James School, we enter into the perpetual wilderness I described earlier. We are a church school that steps into the loneliness, into that desert and we start by building real, deep, abiding relationships; relationships of support, and nurture, and affection, like the angels offered to Jesus. Not relationships that are transactional, relationships of greed and power like the devil offered. We have to be committed to a different way of life, a life that we work to build and strengthen for our students and their families. A community grounded in love and grace.

As Paul tells the Corinthians, and as we tell our students and families, there is no suffering, no testing, that they cannot endure. But it's not that God will magically zap them with the ability to pick themselves up and keep walking. Rather the strength comes from knowing that they are God's beloved. They are God's ongoing story in the world. The strength comes from knowing, as Paul says, that there is no testing that is not common to us all.

For us and for the students and families entrusted to our care, the strength comes from not being alone. The strength comes from being together as a community.

I often say to our students, if it all seems like too much, let's not only look toward the heavens for God for the strength to keep going. Look around at those sitting around us. God is here already. The strength comes from this great cloud of witnesses who have walked through the valley of the shadow of death and, if they need us to, who will walk through the valley with us again. The strength to endure comes from each other. We have angels with us in the wilderness

and we can be and call on the angels to be with those who are experiencing a perpetual wilderness.

When we bear burdens, together.

When we join hands, together.

When we get dirty, together.

When we sow new life, together.

I look forward to meeting each of you after today's Mass.