

Sermon for 2-28-10

Life in the wilderness

1 Corinthians 10:1-13

I congratulate you who are called by God and chosen by the people of God for leadership in this church. This calling to ministry recognized today is especially a blessing during Lent. The true Lent, the real Lent, has nothing to do with giving up sugar in your tea, or trying to feel it's wicked to be yourself passively. Positively, Lent is time of communion with our Lord through the act of giving yourself to the Lord. And, this communion is glory. Christ's glory and your glory. Let your commitment to responsibility in the church be your glory.

Lent is supposed to be the time when we think of Jesus in the wilderness. And, the wilderness belongs to us. In today's scripture reading, 1 Corinthians 10:1-13, the Apostle Paul reminded the Christians in the church in Corinth of the life of the Israelites in the wilderness. This story of the Israelites in the wilderness is recorded in the Book of Exodus, chapters 14 and 15. The scene of Exodus 14 and 15 are quite a contrast to each other. Chapter 14 describes the triumph of crossing the Red Sea. Chapter 15 tells of the depression of a life in the wilderness. The mountaintop triumphal ecstasy in chapter 14, and the deep down valley of fallen depression in chapter 15 show the spectrum of life for us. According to Exodus, the Israelites experienced both triumph and depression within a span of three days. How vulnerable the people of God are! God trained these vulnerable people in the life of the wilderness.

There are two ways to interpret the life of the wilderness: positively and negatively. Positively, God, Yahweh, is repeatedly portrayed as providing for Israel's needs in the desert in the most dramatic ways. These include guidance by the pillar of cloud and fire and by the movement of the ark, as well as the provision of food and drink. Even the hardships of the journey are seen positively as divine discipline. (Deut 8:3-5)

Have you ever experienced living in the wilderness? I had dreamed of coming to the United States since childhood. For me, the United States was an ideal country of liberty and opportunity, wealth and peace, a paradise in the world for which many people longed. After my brother was shot and killed in California by two eighteen-year-old drug dealers, a reflection of the excessive personal liberty in this society, I also began to be aware of some of the evils of spirit and mind in this country.

When I started ministry in Denver among the Korean-Americans, I felt that I should give them hope and encourage them to live in this country. Everybody had experience of the wilderness and wandering in their life as immigrants. Everyone had had barriers to overcome, in language, culture, social and economic difficulties.

I wrote a poem in Korean titled, "Where is Light in the Night of the Wilderness? In translation, the poem goes like this:

"On the journey we encountered the wilderness, where we lost the light, and we didn't know where to go. No light to see, no way prepared, no direction forward and no leader to follow. O Lord, we are stuck in this place, and we can't return, nor go forward. O Lord, may the way, the truth, and the life be with us and lead us so that we may not fall on evil and failure in life, but rather follow you eternally! You are our only way, and hope, and strength."

I gave my poem to a song-writer in my congregation and he wrote a piece of music and we used to sing this song in every Sunday. This is the wilderness I have experienced. This is an external, outside wilderness in this world.

But, there is another kind of wilderness, the real wilderness that is within us all. This is inside, a spiritual wilderness.

Paul presents a warning in the form of an example from the spiritual history of Israel. God's chosen people had experienced a miraculous deliverance and had received many advantages from God. Yet, they fell into sin and almost all of a whole generation perished in the wilderness.

Paul interprets the passing of the Israelites through the Red Sea as a baptism from God. All of them were baptized unto Moses in the Red Sea. And, Paul also interprets the Israelites' eating Manna in the wilderness as spiritual food, and their drinking water from the rock as the Rock of Christ.

There were disasters in the life of the Israelites that came by three things in the wilderness: idolatry, sexual immorality, and tempting God.

The Israelites were recorded as having sat to eat and drink at the feast of an idol, a golden calf in Horeb. By associating with the heathen in their festivals, the Israelites became actual idolaters. I think there were more incidents in dealing with idolatry than simply participating in idol festivals.

When the people of Israel were in the process of crossing into the promised land of Canaan, they settled down beside their Canaanite neighbors. The people of Israel who had been wandering in the wilderness for many years now tried their hand at farming, and they didn't know the first thing about it. They had been nomads. The Canaanites, on the other hand, had been farming for many years. They knew how to do it. The Israelites had never farmed before at all. They were rookies at farming, totally inexperienced.

So, when the time came for that first harvest, who do you think had the best crops? Why, the Canaanites, of course, because they were experienced farmers. They knew what they were doing. They knew how to farm. The Israelites went over to their Canaanite

neighbors and said, “We noticed that your crops are much better than ours. Why is that? How did you do it?”

“Simple,” the Canaanites said, “we prayed to Baal! He is our local fertility god, and we pray to him, and he gives us good crops.” So, the Israelites began to wonder and reason like this: Maybe if we prayed to Baal, just a little bit... what could it hurt? It might even give us a better harvest. Maybe it’s worth a try.” That is one possible guess.

This is my guess why the Israelites so easily fell into idolatry. The wilderness is a metaphor of life in agony, and of the dull repetition of life. As the wilderness routine continued, the people of God were looking for excitement in the wilderness. The guess is that the Israelite men had interest in the Canaanite women, and got married to the pagan women. As you know, most of males listen to a wife’s requests, otherwise the peace of the family may come to an end! It became a tradition that husbands should listen a wife’s suggestion from the period of Adam. Adam listened Eve’s suggestion, “Try and taste the fruit of the Knowledge of Good and Evil!” So, the Adam listened to Eve and fell into temptation. The Israelite husbands listened to their Canaanite wives, who said, “Let’s go to worship Baal as well as the Israel God!” So they did, and became idolaters.

Idolatry is an attitude of giving worth to something other than God in God’s place. Either visibly or invisibly, we tend to give our hearts and minds and interests to objects other than God. That is idolatry. Modern idolatry is worshipping the gods of Mammon, popularity and success.

When Sun and I traveled to Israel on a Holy Land tour, we had a chance to see the city of Philippi, which was great city in a harbor located in the Mediterranean Sea. There stood a statue of a goddess and a pagan temple. The guide told us that Philippi was a modern city where export and import ships were anchored. The pagan temple was a temple dedicated to a goddess, and foreigners and fishermen attended the temple to worship the goddess. In the temple, they held sacred sexual ceremonies among the men and women in worship attendance. This ritual combined the sacred with sex in the form of a ceremony, and this ceremony became a trend in pagan religions. Sexual immorality and pagan religions were identical. The tide of secular sexual immorality came into the Corinthian church and corrupted the pure Christian spirituality in the church. Such was the church to which Paul wrote his warnings.

The number of incidents of Israelite adultery, found in Numbers chapter 25, is cited as 24,000. Paul states that 23,000 were destroyed in a day. Sex and the sacred are mixed in modern life. Sexual immorality destroys not only the person, and but also family and community, and humanity in physical and spiritual ways.

Temping God is the next admonition. We are tempted to give up, to despair. We are tempted to cynicism. We are tempted, sometimes to cruelty. We are tempted not to help others when we know we can, because, we think, what’s the use? We are tempted to disbelieve in what we are, to distrust ourselves, to deny that it is the Spirit Himself which bore witness with our spirit; God in us.

In any game of sport, the offensive is the best way to defend. If giving up is an example of defensive posture, to give is an example of a proactive, offensive game-plan. To live is to give. To give is to be. To give is to find yourself in communion with all those about you. You don't have to wait for it until you die or the world comes to an end. It can be your now.

In the First Epistle of St. Peter, we read: "Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal which comes upon you to prove you, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice, in so far as you share Christ's sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed."

Accept your wilderness. From the story of the Son of Man our Lord, realize what your Lent really means, and then the angels will minister to you as they did to Him. In other words, you'll find moments when giving for love's sake really satisfies you, really makes you feel alive and in contact. And at such moments, Christ's glory is revealed, and we rejoice and are glad. We look at the travail of our soul and are satisfied. Lent, we discover, is Easter in disguise.