***Surviving the Desert***

**Luke 4:1-15**

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*Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, where for forty days he was tempted by the devil. He ate nothing at all during those days, and when they were over, he was famished. The devil said to him, ‘If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread.’ Jesus answered him, ‘It is written, “One does not live by bread alone.” ’*

*Then the devil led him up and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. And the devil said to him, ‘To you I will give their glory and all this authority; for it has been given over to me, and I give it to anyone I please. If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours.’ Jesus answered him, ‘It is written,  
“Worship the Lord your God,  
   and serve only him.” ’*

*Then the devil took him to Jerusalem, and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, ‘If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here, for it is written,   
 “He will command his angels concerning you,  
    to protect you”,   
 and  
 “On their hands they will bear you up,  
    so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.” ’   
Jesus answered him, ‘It is said, “Do not put the Lord your God to the test.” ’ When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time.*

*Then Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee, and a report about him spread through all the surrounding country. He began to teach in their synagogues and was praised by everyone.*

I

If you search the Internet for “desert survival stories,” you’ll find lots of heart-warming stories about people who get rescued from danger in the desert. For example, the story of a woman named Victoria Grover appears on many websites. In 2012 Victoria, then 59 years old, was hiking in the high desert of Utah. Her plan was to hike 6 miles and then go home. But while jumping down a small ledge, she broke her leg. The only way she could move was by shuffling along on the ground from a seated position. She had no food. She had not told anyone where she was going. The most dangerous part of this was hypothermia since night-time temperatures fell to around freezing. She was trapped there for 4 days, sleeping during the day and huddling for warmth at night, until she was discovered and rescued.

These survival stories on the Internet usually have the same story line. Our intrepid hero goes into the one of the world’s vast deserts thinking she will be home for dinner. Then an accident happens. She breaks a leg, gets lost, runs out of water, and so on. She or he courageously pushes the limits of endurance to battle the elements and survive. And then almost magically, a search party appears and rescues them from near death. After a short stint in the hospital, their story appears in the news and they become slightly famous. These stories warm our hearts. They enhance our faith in the human community, reinforcing our belief that we can fix most problems if we just try hard enough and work together.

II

The story of Jesus in the wilderness stands in high contrast to the desert survival stories on the Internet. The main contrast is that no one comes to magically rescue Jesus. There are no search parties with bloodhounds, no helicopters flying overhead, and no GPS trackers. Whatever Jesus faces out there in the desert he faces alone, with no one except God to help him. For all practical purposes, he is cut off from the rest of the human community. Other humans are not going to help him. It’s not clear from the story that anyone back home even misses him or knows where he is. No one except God and the tempter know he’s there. If Jesus survives this desert experience, he will have to do so by himself, without help from other human beings.

III

It may be that you were once in the desert yourself. Perhaps you are there right now. Or perhaps for you some desert experience is still to come later in life. At one time or another, many of us live for a while in the desert. We might go bankrupt. We watch one of our children suffer. We feel that we have failed and so must leave our job. Or we have a job that deadens our spirit and hollows out our energy. We have this big dream for ourselves or for someone we care about, and the dream pops like a balloon and fizzles to the ground. We lose our reputation and for a while live in shame. A friend rejects us. Someone we love dies. Life experiences such as these do not automatically mean we will enter a spiritual desert, yet frequently it does happen that way.

I have a friend who’s in a desert right now. He says he feels empty. He still believes intellectually that God is nearby, so feeling abandoned by God is not really the problem. He’s just empty inside, and for him life is pretty hard at the moment. That’s what the desert feels like. Empty. Hard. Unpleasant.

Here’s the thing. In a lot of life’s desert experiences, you have to go through them yourself. Nobody else can do it for you. It’s your path and you’re the one who has to walk it. Sure, other people might know about it and might be able to offer you some help, some solace. But they will not be able to fix the problem for you. They will not be able to rescue you magically. The helicopters won’t lift you out and fly you away. Like Jesus, you gotta do this on your own.

A desert experience can last a long time. Jesus himself was in the desert a long time. The story says he was there 40 days, but we don’t need to take that literally. The Bible uses the number 40 in something like 10-12 different stories. Scripture says, for instance, that it rained 40 days during the flood, that Moses lived 40 years in Midian, that Israel wandered in the wilderness 40 years, that the Hebrew scouts spied out Canaan 40 days, that Goliath taunted Saul’s army 40 days, and so on. 40 days, or 40 years, is stock biblical language that just means a long time. How long is a long time? Well, it’s long. Your desert experience will undoubtedly feel interminable, no matter what the chronological length is. It might run several months, a dozen years, two dozen years, or anything in between. It’s a long and lonely time.

IV

Another difference between those desert survival stories on the Internet and the survival story of Jesus is the role of the Spirit. Most Internet stories are written for a general audience, many of whom are not Christian. The stories don’t talk about what role, if any, the Holy Spirit might have had in helping to save these people from the desert. By contrast, Luke is clear that the Spirit played a big role in Jesus’ desert experience. At the beginning of the story Luke says the Spirit “led” Jesus into the desert. That word “led” implies that the Spirit went into the wilderness first, forging a path, so to speak, with Jesus following behind. The word “led” also suggests that the Spirit stayed with Jesus during the entire experience. Lest we miss this detail about the presence of the Spirit, Luke underscores it in verse 1 by saying that Jesus was “full of the Holy Spirit” because of the baptism he had just received. Therefore throughout his desert experience, Jesus was filled with, and accompanied by, the Spirit.

Think how enormously important this is for us. Like Jesus, many of us in this room have been baptized. We belong to God and God belongs to us. There’s a covenant between us, a commitment. One part of God’s commitment to us is that God, through the agency of the Spirit, will not leave us. Sometimes it might not feel to us like the Spirit is hanging around, but our feelings don’t always give us the full picture. Even if we don’t feel it, the Spirit is an irrevocable gift of our baptism, just as it was an irrevocable gift to Jesus in his baptism. If you’re not yet baptized, this is one compelling reason to commit yourself to God in baptism: you receive the gift of the Spirit, which will never abandon you.

The Spirit became Jesus’ companion at the moment of his baptism and stayed with him for the rest of his life. That’s true for us too: in baptism the Spirit becomes our life-long companion, even while we’re in the desert. This is the overarching reason why we can survive desert experiences. Although other human beings can’t rescue us from spiritual deserts, the Spirit accompanies us into those deserts. The Spirit becomes our water, our manna and quail. We’re never alone, even if we sometimes feel alone! In the desert we always have a companion!

Thanks to the Spirit, desert experiences do not have to defeat us. The friendship of the Spirit is ultimately what guides us through the desert and out on the other side. This means that surviving the desert mostly means zeroing in on your friendship with the Spirit. Prayer and meditating on scripture are great ways for us to be companions of the Spirit, but I want to mention another way that we often miss.

V

It’s the practice of giving our consent. At a basic level, giving our consent means to accept that I am indeed in the desert. It’s a reality in my life and it’s probably not going to go away anytime soon. I’m not going to deny it. I’m not going to evade it. I’m not going to try and magically escape this. Instead I will acknowledge it. I will work with it. I will open myself to what I can learn while I’m in this desert. The first part of consent is to accept the fact of being in the desert.

The second part of giving our consent is to throw our arms wide open to the person and presence of the Spirit, in this moment of the day, in this place of my life. I open my heart, my mind, and my soul to the Spirit. I can do this right now, and I will do it again later in the day. I will do it tomorrow and next week and next month. I do not know how I’m going to survive this desert, much less find a way out of this desert. But the Spirit knows a way out and the Spirit will accompany me until an exit appears.

Now it’s true that giving this kind of radical consent can be scary. It can make us feel hugely vulnerable. But vulnerability to God is one of the key postures of authentic Christian living. Vulnerability to God is ultimately what saves us. Giving my consent to the Spirit is a way of acknowledging that God knows more than I do, sees more perceptively than I do, and has wisdom far superior to whatever tiny wisdom I have. Of course I do not *have* to give my consent, and I remain a free person whether I give my consent or not. Yet as I continue giving my consent throughout this desert experience, and indeed throughout my whole life, I become a more intimate companion of the Spirit, and the Spirit becomes more intimate with me.

Here at the beginning of Lent we might want to consider the role of consent in our lives, not just the initial consent we give in our baptism, but the ongoing consent that we give to God throughout our life. In what area of life do we want to give our consent now? We may not know exactly what we’re giving our consent to. The future might look fuzzy. Maybe all we know is that we’re giving consent to the person and presence of the Spirit. That’s ok, because this Spirit, the Spirit of God, is completely trustworthy. In our consent to the Spirit, and in the Spirit’s consent to us, lies our future, our companionship, and our hope.