



Richmond Hill Reflections

“The Need for Wilderness” (Preached by Rev. James Ravenscroft)

January 12, 2020; First Sunday after Epiphany

Readings: Matthew 4:1-11; “Chatham Peace Vigil” by Dan Wilcox

I know it's only the 12th, but New Year's seems so long ago. I awoke on New Year's Day with hope. I thought 2020 was going to beckon to us to see the world in a new way. Then just as the extent of bushfires in Australia was being reported in earnest, it all got so much worse – Qaseem Suleimani was killed, Iran retaliated against US bases in Iraq, and the greatest heart-break, the Ukrainian plane was shot down killing all on board. So naïve to think 2020 could bring change. Now I admit that is despair talking. I do have hope. A new perspective doesn't come because a new year has a symbolic number. It is going to take some work to get out of the collective weeds we are now in.

The first step is figuring out how we got there and our gospel offers insight, or more to the point what preceded it does. Last week we heard how at his baptism Jesus felt claimed as G-d's beloved child. He went to the wilderness to discern what to make of that but regretfully, we haven't done, instead letting the belief that we're special drive us. We experience this in a few ways. As humans we believe we are set apart from other creatures and so our needs take precedence. We use the bible to back this up, especially that we have dominion. We've radically reshaped the environment and brought on the climate crisis we're facing, especially right now in Australia. Those of European descent feel special through the lens of white privilege. Again, it's about perceived precedence of needs. The powerful in predominantly white nations exert economic and military might over mostly non-white nations, and do the same over the non-white population at home. We know this to be true. As we keep narrowing down those who feel they have special status, belief in “manifest destiny” and the perceived superiority of capitalism leads our American friends to assert their needs over others, often under the guise of promoting “democracy”. We're not much better, just less powerful. There's religious superiority at play too, the nations which exert power historically being Christian. The status of being “beloved” is a seductive temptation we tragically fall into.

Jesus didn't fall into it, instead he went into the wilderness. At first glance what happens out there appears simple. In each temptation, Jesus seems to take the opposite position as the devil, each choice falling along a binary: eat or go hungry, test G-d or don't, have ultimate world power or nothing. We see it this way because that's how we tend to make moral decisions, dividing everything into good and bad, making people either friend or enemy. This dual thinking taps into the seduction of seeing oneself as special, and others as not. As I divide the world into camps, I see all the ideas of my own people as good and those of my enemy as bad. Not only do I struggle to hear what they offer as potential wisdom, but I find it difficult to see any of the flaws in my own people's beliefs and practices. The last temptation Jesus experiences highlights this. As the devil offers Jesus authority

over all the world's kingdoms, the temptation to accept would be strong. He'd think of all the good he could do with everyone under his rule. But rather than offer an alternative to the empire he would simply be replacing one empire with another. A benevolent dictator is still a dictator.

Rather than this, I hear Jesus wrestling with self-interest as he seeks to be in relationship with G-d, and in relationship with others. This is why each time he appeals to scripture. We don't see this right away because we often see scripture through the same binary. We approach it as a rule book and then pick one passage or another to prove that someone is wrong. This keeps us feeling "special" and just maintains conflict, injustice, and environmental harm, the weed we are in. But when I read the bible, I find a community striving to make sense of a changing world. I find an overarching narrative where love, justice and harmony with creation are increasingly central, with more and more people viewed to be family. Rather than appeal to either-or thinking, in always referring to scripture, Jesus makes this narrative of justice and love central. His relationship with G-d is central in his choices and it will then be lived out in his relationship with others.

We can do the same but to do this we need to withdraw "to the wilderness", take time to cultivate inner silence through contemplative practice. We are called to do this as well as to respond with just and loving action. This is the rhythm we see in Dan Wilcox's poem. For a moment he withdraws from the protest and seeks solace at the lunch counter. Doing this enables him to return to the street. It doesn't matter the type of contemplation I do. It could be chanting, centring prayer, meditative walking, yoga, prayerful painting. Go online and you will find many options. But when I take time for inner silence, and for a moment let go of my constant thoughts, allowing them to flow by rather than cling to them, I start to recognize that I'm more than my thoughts. I'm more than all the things I consider as right and wrong. I can make space to hear the views of others with more openness and grace. Balancing action with contemplation helps me stay grounded in the changes I seek, to check whether what I'm doing is really about helping another or just bolstering my pride. As Franciscan monk and founder of the Center for Action and Contemplation, Richard Rohr puts it, "Without action, our spirituality becomes lifeless and bears no authentic fruit. [But] without contemplation, all our doing comes from ego, even if it looks selfless, and it can cause more harm than good."

In contemplation I come to a deeper awareness of my true self, the one who doesn't need the validation of "special status" the world thinks I need. I find my identity in G-d's love. I realize this is what it means to be claimed as beloved, not just me but every person, and more than that every creature, all of life, all reality, resting in G-d's claim. From that space I can more deeply appreciate the wisdom of today's children's story – that we need all of the ways of seeing G-d for G-d to be one, and so we need all the different ways of being human in this world for all of us to be one family. I can walk in pursuit of peace as Jesus did because I am seek it in my heart.

And so I still hope. Like Jesus in the wilderness, in contemplation we can each seek the clarity we need to root our actions in authentic love. This year, this decade, may we each seek a balance of

action and contemplation, so that each of us can feel the truth of being beloved of G-d, and treat others in a way that honours that they are beloved as well. May it be so. Amen.