

Real-Life Deserts

By: Tina Reyes

March 6, 2022. On this first Sunday in Lent, Guest Pastor Tina Reyes preaches on the temptation of Jesus in the desert, and the real-life deserts in our lives that open up all those things that we try to push back: our vulnerability, our fears, and our anxieties.

Reading: [Luke 4:1-13](#)

*** Transcript ***

In the name of Jesus. Amen.

In the last few years I've been drawn to deserts. And I think one of the very first things that I truly realized was that they are not the wastelands of nothingness that sometimes we attribute them to be. Deserts, as places apart, are full of mystery and abundance and life. My trips to New Mexico and Southern Arizona amaze me every time, at the diversity that can be found in these places, and if you allow yourself to be still long enough, the promise of life that exists.

And so as we approach this text this morning from the fourth chapter of Luke, it's a familiar text. If you said, "But I heard it last year on the first Sunday of Lent," I would say, "Yes, and you will hear it again next year on the first Sunday of Lent. That's how it works." This year it feels a little different though. Jesus isn't cast into the desert as a punishment or a test insomuch as the Spirit drives him there — for a time apart, for discernment, for retreat, for guidance as to what's next. This time apart comes directly after Jesus is baptized, and God announces for all to hear that Jesus is indeed God's son, the Beloved. It should really make us all think about our own baptisms — and that it's not just the water sprinkling, that baptism really changes our lives. And in discernment and in hunger, at the end of this long time apart, Jesus is confronted with choices: to lean into an economy of scarcity, for which the world can satisfy for a short amount of time, or to lean into an economy of abundance, knowing that he has all that he needs right now as he begins to live out the good news — which, if you kept reading in Luke, is the very next story. See how it all works together there?

So we have these options this morning: trusting in God's abundance, that God will always be there and that God will always give you what you need for that moment, or to become your own God and to provide for yourself.

I've been thinking a lot about how we ourselves interact with deserts, real and metaphorical, this past week, those places that seem lifeless and empty and daunting. You know, you've had some of those desert places in your lives: struggling to find enough, or really what the world deems is enough for you — even though, let's be honest, our basic needs are being met. Are you racing through these deserts just to get things done? Or do we allow ourselves grace to explore and to delight what is in this odd, and amazing place? Even in our text, we tend to zip through the desert that Jesus is in to get to that crux of the matter. If Lent is a desert, I often feel that we try to get through it as fast as we can. It's a necessary thing to get to Easter; we don't necessarily like to do it. I mean, it's not really in the Bible, is it? All of that is true.

And the hope for Lent though, is to take that time to explore, to see what is out there, to join others. Lent (or deserts) in our lives open up all those things that we try to push back: our vulnerability, our fears, our anxieties... which is why I believe we try to get through Lent really fast and not have to think

about it so much so we don't have to get stuck on those things, the end. Not really.

Beloved, the desert calls us to stand with others in their own wilderness experiences. And that is hard. The desert calls us into the promise of abundant love and to cast aside the temptations of the world that is set aside, that they live for power, wealth, and invulnerability. Beloved, the desert calls us to live in the tension of desolation and to possibility. And through it all, in the desert, God is with us.

As a campus pastor, I witness and walk with students who find themselves in all sorts of real-life deserts. The whole experience of being away from home, of having to rely on their own for things like getting up on time, having clean clothes, and advocating for oneself, are all journeys through a wilderness. And some students do it better than others. For others, this time is a journey into who or to what they are called to be: the abundant, extravagant person God created — and that person quite often is different from the one they had envisioned. And so they're stuck in that tension of desolation and a possibility, and it's rough for them. There is grief for what was and hope for what will be. Some students will wrestle and ask questions, and try to push it back and shove it down. And others will seek solidarity. They will look for people like them to accompany them. Others will just try to tough it out, and find that they are surprised to find that they had a support system all along.

This past Wednesday, my ecumenical partners and I went to SLU and to WashU to impose ashes on students, faculty, and staff. We just set ourselves outside in spaces with our little plastic containers of palm ash and oil, in our black cassocks — three female pastors, and a non-binary pastor standing in a row, looking a little bit out of place, but welcoming and inviting folks to receive that ash cross on their forehead and answering any and all questions that students asked us. And we were blessed to have a beautiful, 80 degree day on Wednesday to do this. Standing at the edge of Mudd Field at WashU it did feel like a bit being in a desert. Students were reveling in the sun at a school known for its academic excellence and its very secular stance. Yes, there were looks. Who are those people in black, with crosses on their heads? And yet folks from all ways of life had different reasons that they came up to us asking for ashes.

And I want to share my favorite story. I think this kind of reminds me of the abundance in the desert. The young man's name is Sayish. He came up and he said, "Are you giving out ashes?" "Yes." "Can I get ashes?" "Yes." "I went to a Catholic School in Dallas, Texas, and I'm not religious or anything. But I really like to get ashes. Is it okay if I get ashes?" "Yes." And so we started talking and having this conversation. I've never seen, honestly, anybody with such a big smile walking up to a group of strange pastors asking for ashes. A lot of times it's, "Ooh it's Ash Wednesday, I need to get my ashes." It's like a thing that you do, because it's Ash Wednesday — especially if you grew up in the tradition.

Sayish grew up adjacent to a Christian tradition, because the Catholic schools were the better schools. And he remembers having to put his hands to cross his arms on his chest to receive his ashes, signifying that he was not Catholic in that place. And he was excited that he just got to receive ashes. And so I asked him, "Why? Is it just because it's what you remember from 12 years of school?" And he says, "No, it helps to ground me in the rest of the world and with creation." What a gift. What a gift that was to us.

You probably, if I'm speaking for myself, felt kind of good about being in my black cassock, standing on the edge of Mudd Field, giving out ashes at WashU. And here is this Spirit moment of being reminded of why we do it. Not only because of our mortality, but we're connected back to God and God's creation.

So what, beloved, if this Lent, this Lent as we're learning once again what it means to be community with one another after a long period of desolation, what if we leaned into those places, as much as we're trying, as fast as we can, to get back to something that we used to know, but maybe that we're being called to still, slow down there, buddy. Dig in a little deeper. Find our people. Acknowledge that even in this space, God is with us, and that's enough. What if, beloved, instead of searching and striving for more — more money, more power, more stuff — we acknowledge that we have enough, and that a full life is not what the world of scarcity claims is good, but our life is full because God's promises spill over, and God hasn't broken a promise yet. What if, beloved, in our abundance we live out our calling, our baptismal callings, to strive for peace and justice by joining others in the places that are their deserts, places where there are literally food deserts (and we don't have to go very far in St. Louis to find those), education deserts, equality deserts? So what if we join others in those places and proclaim God's love in word and deed, because God loves all of God's creation?

Beloved, with the help of the Holy Spirit and by God's amazing grace, I pray that you know abundance and hope in whatever desert you journey this Lent.

Amen.

*** Keywords ***

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