

1 Lent Year B
The Rev. Paul J. Carling, Ph.D.

Trinity Episcopal Church
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Survivor: The Wilderness Version
Genesis 9: 8-17, 3: 1-7; Matthew 1: 9-15

Most of us get a good long wait between our baptism and the first time we're tempted to sin – unless wanting too much breast milk, or wanting too little sleep classify as temptations... But, as one preacher described today's gospel passage, *"Here's Jesus – hair still wet from his baptism, with God's thundering declaration, 'You are my Beloved Son,' still ringing in his ears – and suddenly that dove that hovered so gently over his head turns into a falcon that leads him straight into the wilderness."*ⁱ

The wilderness is a tough place to be tested. I remember one summer, Cherise and I went camping in the Southwest, a perfect place for long runs in the desert. The first morning, I set out early, the breeze in my hair, the cool desert air keeping my skin dry. As I jogged along, I noticed how *quiet* it was – so quiet I couldn't avoid all those voices inside my head – anxious, fearful voices I usually silence by reading some detective novel, or working too many hours, or eating something sinful. I suddenly felt vulnerable.

Rather than paying attention to what God might be trying to telling me through all these feelings, I distracted myself by counting my steps. Until I heard the howl of a coyote in the distance, and felt something deeper – terror.

As I emerged from a stand of scrub pine, I found myself face to face with a large pack of coyotes, less than 100 feet away, all staring right at me. I'm told you're not supposed to show fear in such situations. Right... I turned and ran all the way back to the campsite... Apparently, the coyotes weren't so hungry that morning.

Jesus had a different approach. He was just as vulnerable to the same doubts, and hungers and fears that bedevil each of us. But he *prepared* for the terrors of the desert, by taking on a spiritual discipline – fasting – that left his body weak, but his spirit strong; that kept him awake and aware of whatever might come his way – inside or out. He stayed connected to God.

That's why, when temptation came, he didn't need to distract himself, or run away. Famished and exhausted, he faced right into it, recognizing temptation for exactly what it was, because he knew who he was and whose he was, and what his faith stood for.

The devil's smart, going right for what we want most – to somehow be our own gods, to live in our own little bubbles, satisfying our own needs, impervious to the distracting cries for help from all those people Jesus simply could not ignore.

But the Holy Spirit is smarter. Just when we think our life is humming along just fine, we too are led into the wilderness, and asked how we will respond.

The people of Parkland Florida have invited us into their most grotesque kind of wilderness right now, an obscure town suddenly notorious as the 18th school shooting in 2018; our 30th mass shooting this year; and the 1607th since Sandy Hook.

This is simply baffling to the rest of the world. As the British publication, *The Economist* headlined, *America seems unable to solve a scourge that exists nowhere else...* and reminds us, that while we have only 5% of the world's population, we own 50% of the world's domestic firearms. They note that Australia had one school shooting in 1999, immediately passed strong gun control laws, and hasn't had a single mass shooting since. Since then, Japan has had zero, England three, and Canada one, while in America, we've had over 500,000 gun deaths since 1999, averaging one mass shooting every day since 2012 and Sandy Hook. This, my friends, is not a political issue, it's a moral crisis.

But just as we're tempted to sink into despair, there's a whisper of hope, an echo of Jesus' righteous anger, of Jesus' moral clarity rising like a phoenix out of these bitter ashes. Listen to Parkland high school senior, Emma Gonzalez's voice on a video press conference that has now gone viral. *"Every single person up here today should be home grieving,"* Gonzalez said. *"But instead we are standing together because all our government... can do is send thoughts and prayers... We students have been having debates about guns in our classes for our entire school lives... and for the last few years, shooter drills... and still it's harder to find someone to go out with on a Saturday night than it is to buy a gun."*

So we need to be the change we can see.... we don't want to be the students who you read about as just another statistic, but as the ones who finally declared, "This is the last mass shooting," and finally changed the laws in this country." Echoing God's cry to Noah, *"Never again,"* these students chanted, *"Never again!"*

It's inspiring to see a generation many adults describe as lazy and self – involved stand up for their beliefs, planning a national 17 minute "walk out" of school next month, followed by a massive teenage march on Washington – the first in our country's history. Maybe Jesus was right about the children showing the rest of us the way.

To be honest, though, I know there are many positions on this issue, including right here in our parish family. And honestly, I don't know if these students, and the rest of us who value children's lives over the unlimited power to purchase guns, will have any more success this time than the last 1600 times. But I do know this. We must do something, rather than nothing. Just like the avalanche of women's voices in the #MeToo movement, I believe these students' voices echo the same cry for justice and mercy Jesus preached. And the only question is whether those of us who call ourselves Christians can join these students in the wilderness we all have created with our silence, and find a way to walk out of it together toward the abundant life that Jesus promised.

Lent is all about strengthening ourselves inside with a deeper faith, and surrounding ourselves outside with a caring community, so we have the strength and courage to follow Jesus' words, *"The time is fulfilled and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news."* Maybe the only question left is, *"Do we really believe in the good news?"*

ⁱ I am grateful to Barbara Brown Taylor (1997), The wilderness exam, in *Bread of Angels*, Cambridge, MA: Cowley Publications, pp. 36-40, for several of these images.