

# Sermons at Christ Church

## *Be One Body In Christ, belonging To Each Other.*

Lent I

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Full of the Holy Spirit after his baptism, Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness, where fasted forty days and was tempted by the devil. The first temptation was for the hungry Jesus to turn stones into loaves of bread. The second temptation was the lure of power. The third temptation was about his identity, how he understood himself and his ministry within God's cosmic plans. The devil was not successful, not because Jesus wasn't hungry or that the promise power wasn't seductive, it was because he had a good grip of who he was. As followers of Christ, the issue isn't that we wouldn't be tempted, but do we have a good sense of who we are, and is our knowledge of ourselves sufficient enough for us to overcome the temptations of bread and worldly power? How well do you know yourself?

The season of Lent is a period of digging deep into ourselves. It is a time where we reflect on the value of life in the wilderness. We learn that the wilderness can be scary, lonely and dark. It highlights human vulnerability. But the irony is that life abounds in the wilderness because that is the place where we come face-to-face with our own reality and the power of the God in whose shadow we abide.

"Man, know thyself," The ancient Greeks remind us. And to know yourself, you have to be in the wilderness. Sometimes tragedy becomes our wilderness. Misfortune and even good fortune become our wilderness. Addictions become our wilderness. Wars become our wilderness. Injustice becomes our wilderness. Scarcity and abundance become our wilderness. I remember Steve and Linda losing part of their house to fire. I grieve for Saah and Theresa losing their son and Bridget losing her husband-those are wilderness moments. They test us. But to overcome and thrive in all these wilderness moments, you have to know yourself, you need to have a good grip of who you are. Remember this, to understand that one does not live by bread alone is to know yourself and to appreciate the insufficiency of the short term satisfaction bread and power.

The Old Testament story is an interesting narrative about the life of a redeemed people. The story makes the point that having experienced the misfortune of being in the wilderness of slavery in Egypt, should they possess and settle on the land to which they have been delivered, and when they experience the wilderness of good harvest, they should reject even the temptation of keeping the first fruits of their harvest for yourselves. Instead, in appreciation for God's saving act of grace, they are to offer the first fruits of their harvest to God.

Before one offers this sacrifice, he or she has to say this to the priest, "A wandering Aramean was my ancestor." In other words, I know myself. I know who I am. I know my ancestors and the God who saved them. I have a grip on my duty to the God who saved me because He saved my ancestors. And so I offer this sacrifice to the God of my salvation.

It is this knowledge of ourselves that essentially frees us from falling for the temptation of wanting to turn stones into bread or being seduced by vain power. To know yourself, is to know who it is that fights your battles for you. To know yourself is to know that life isn't all about bread-the material stuff that offers temporary comforts. To know yourself is to know the limits of power and the just and fair way in which you can use that power.

Someone told me a story about a picture she saw on TV. The picture was about a Ukrainian mother trying to clutch her baby and hold on to her suitcase at the same time. This past Thursday I made the point in my weekly article that we cannot be God, but we can be like God by being more human. But know this, our world sure is in a terrible mess if a mother has to choose between her suitcase and her baby. Our world sure is in a terrible mess if the promise of the whole world convinces you to kill innocent women and children. How well do you know yourself?

To know yourself is to pray that you may look at your neighbor, not with the eye of domination but with a pride of service and the power of worship. To know yourself is to come to the place in life where no temptation is too high to climb or too strong to overcome. To know yourself is the point of Lent-it is to see in Jesus Christ the epitome of those who overcome their temptations because they have a grip on who they are.

To know yourself, is to spend time in solitude. To be alone in prayer and meditation. It is a different kind of wilderness. It is synonymous with looking in the mirror. For in that moment when you are alone, for once, concentrating on yourself, taking stock of your life-where you are, where you have been and where you going-your struggles, challenges and weaknesses.

And asking the tough questions, who am I and what is my purpose in life? So long as you are honest with yourself, life often takes on a different meaning and path.

I read a letter John Keats, an English poet, wrote to his brother George and his wife Georgina about his decision not to marry and his value for solitude as the avenue by which we access beauty and truth. "Think of my pleasure in solitude, in comparison of my commerce with the world-there I am a child-there they do not know me, not even my most intimate acquaintance-I give into their feelings as though I were refraining from irritating a little child-Some think me middling, others silly, others foolish-everyone thinks he seeks my weak side against my will; when in truth it is with my will-I am content to be thought all this because I have in my own breast so great a resource." For Keats, solitude was a great resource, not only because the road to love and beauty passed through the gates of solitude, but that it is in solitude that we find the most sacred and beautiful space where we feel wholly at home, where we really get to know ourselves. How well do you know yourself?

The tragedy is that we don't even know ourselves and do not make an honest attempt to do so. Because we don't know ourselves we don't know the other-the neighbor. And because we don't know the other we feel they do not matter, they don't count. And because they do not matter or count, we don't mind throwing bombs all over them and killing them. Because they do not count we don't mind discriminating against them. The horror out of Ukraine makes you wonder if we have learned any lessons from our recent past. We have never needed as much deliverance as we do today. We have never felt the need to walk into the wilderness with Jesus as we do today. How well do you know yourself?

I need you to remember that God's act of redeeming those in bondage did not end with the deliverance of the people of Israel in Egypt, nor did it end after the resurrection of Christ. It continues even to this day because of our tendency to divide and conquer, our proclivity to

dominate others, our propensity to value wealth and privilege over people and our desire to segregate and create silos that benefit the metaphorical Jew and not the Gentile.

Lent is counter cultural. It is the season where being in solitude feels like being lost in order to find yourself again. Lent is the season where we desire to walk into the wilderness with Jesus because it is there that we can hear ourselves and the voice of God through the silence. It is there that we can learn what it means to live with little or none at all. It is there that we get the chance to hear God speak to us in ways we never thought possible.

It is there that we get the chance to know ourselves. It is there that we come to understand what it means to love. It is there that we come to understand that no amount of material wealth or worldly power is enough to compensate for our lives or even save us. As Paul said, the only name that can save us is Jesus Christ. The only name that gives us meaning is Jesus Christ. The only name that offers us a reason to look beyond our own particularities of being either Jew or Greek is Jesus Christ. And those who believe and confess him shall be saved.

Paul's suggestion doesn't mean that the challenges we face will go away when we confess and believe, if anything at all, the temptation of Jesus after his baptism, fasting and prayer in the wilderness points to the contrary. Like Jesus, we too have been strengthened by the spirit in our baptism- but the wilderness awaits with a lifetime of temptations to draw us back into the life we have rejected. But to overcome and thrive is to embrace the work of the Holy Spirit in you. It is to know yourself. And so, this day, and every day, make every attempt to know yourself. Pursue every opportunity to know yourself. It is only through your knowledge of yourself combined with the power of the Holy Spirit can you overcome the temptations that the devil might throw your way. How well do you know yourself? Get to know yourself.

Amen.