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Lent 1B – February 18, 2018

Today's very succinct story of Jesus' Baptism, Temptation in the Wilderness, and start of his ministry has much to say to us as we begin this season of Lent, a season when we go deeper into our faith, and seek God's healing and forgiveness of all that prevents us from fully participating in the Kingdom come near. And, the lessons offered in today's Gospel also couldn't be more appropriate as we try to find God in the midst of the tragedy our nation has suffered this week.

In today's Gospel, after his Baptism by John, Jesus is affirmed as God's beloved Son, and then is driven into the wilderness where he is tempted by Satan and terrorized by wild animals. Notice it is the same Spirit who affirms Jesus that drives him into wilderness. What's up with that? Why did Jesus need to be driven into the wilderness for a period of struggle and temptation? Why was this experience essential to his ministry? This is a hard one to understand, but I think we find the answer in the wilderness. The Spirit drove Jesus into the wilderness so Jesus could discover what it really meant to be beloved. In our own lives we don't look for opportunities to struggle, nor do we ask for trials and temptation. We don't choose them – they happen to us. And, even when the challenges before us are the results of our own poor choices, it isn't because we were actively seeking trouble. But it happens. And, I think the Gospel today tells us that we sometimes have to be urged to move through those challenges in order to discover our own belovedness in the power of God's healing presence. While we might do everything within our own power to avoid walking through the challenges - trying to figure it out ourselves, trying to cover up our messes, trying to make it somebody else's fault - it is only when we acknowledge our own powerlessness within the brokenness of our lives - when we place our lives in God's hands - that we can find our true source of power and purpose in God.

At this point, I want to make something very clear. God does not cause us to suffer. God does not inflict pain and misery on us. Not as

punishment, not to teach us a lesson, and not to humble us. While in this Gospel story the Spirit drives Jesus into the wilderness, the Spirit does not tempt Jesus nor is the Spirit one of the wild animals that terrorizes him. Rather God's angels attend to Jesus during this time of trial. God does not want us to suffer, let alone cause us to. But, through today's Gospel, I hope we see that in our wilderness times, it is by emptying ourselves and placing ourselves completely in God's hands that we find our place in God with angels attending to us. And, in this discovery are inspired and strengthened to go out into the world to do the work God has given us to do. That is the lesson of today's Gospel - Jesus, beloved Son of God, in the wilderness discovers what that belovedness means. He is protected, strengthened, and made ready to go out and proclaim God's Kingdom.

We're in that wilderness time right now. The horror of what happened at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School is unfathomable. There are no words to express our bewilderment, our sorrow, our anger. And, for those parents, and teachers, and friends and neighbors who find themselves in the midst of it - this wilderness for them must seem so dark, and cold and empty.

And, this tragedy is made so much worse by the fact that it isn't the first, not even the first this year, and I think we're all just starting to realize that this is the new normal for our country, and unless there is deep change, we are unlikely to see tragedies like this stop. In fact, they're likely to get worse. We are in a wilderness - a cold, dark, and empty wilderness - and is there any wilderness darker or lonelier than the wilderness of our own despair and confusion, are there any wild beasts more vicious than our own fear, and anger, and sadness?

I'd like to suggest that Jesus is with us in this wilderness. And, if we're willing to truly follow Jesus' example, I believe we will find our answers. But, not on our own - not by our own wits, or by our own powers, or our own plans and policies and systems - all of which have brought us to the wilderness we are in now. Those are the temptations that keep us floundering in our own brokenness - the temptations to come to quick and easy answers, offer empty prayers and platitudes, to find scapegoats - or even worse to simply shrug, and say I can't do anything.

We have to start by following Jesus into this wilderness - it is there that we must go - powerless, vulnerable, and open - just as Jesus did. And it was in this stance of least resistance to God's grace that Jesus resisted evil. It was in emptying himself and taking the form of a slave that he was attended to by the heavenly angels. This was how he discovered what it truly meant to be beloved. Entering the wilderness vulnerable, entering the wilderness in prayer.

And, when we enter this quiet place of prayer where we dwell with God, setting aside any thoughts or concerns other than to be with God, releasing thoughts, feelings, sensations, that we rely on God to be our shield against the wild beasts - the wild beasts of our despair, our hopelessness, our anger our fear, our self-assurance, our self-righteousness, our self-confidence. And it is in this stance of least resistance that we become aware of how we are held up and protected, we become more and more aware of our own belovedness, that sweet gentle space in which God is well-pleased with us. And perhaps in this stance of least resistance we also sense the belovedness of all God's Creation - the birds, the cactus, the mountains, and all the people with which we share this Creation, all made in the image and likeness of the Creator, all of which he called good. And, in that quiet place, as we get a sense of that Great Belovedness and a sense of our own special place in that belovedness, perhaps we have strength enough to perceive some of the wilderness in which we find ourselves - not all of it, because it is too much, too unfathomable - and perhaps in letting in a bit of wilderness, we can still sense our belovedness, still sense our connection with all of God's beloved, and, in that place of connection we become aware of the fragility and preciousness of life, of our fragility and preciousness, and of the fragility and preciousness of all life, because it all reflects the image and likeness of the Creator.

And, as we touch the fragility and vulnerability of that belovedness, perhaps we can feel a bit of the genuine hurt at the loss of so many innocent and promising young lives this week - not the indignant, despairing, ego-driven hurt - but the quiet, deep hurt that is connected to all the wounds of the world, the hurt that we can feel in our depths because we too have suffered, we too have lost, and in touching that hurt we know we touch the one Great Sorrow that is all sorrow, and perhaps

become aware at a much deeper level than we've experienced before of that Great Hurt that Jesus carried for us, and carries with us in this time of tragedy...and perhaps in touching that hurt, ever so lightly - we can also see the Christ, in the fullness of his vulnerable love, take and carry the fullness of that Great Sorrow - which is much too great for any one of us to fully comprehend - he takes it and embraces it and makes it his own and transforms it back into life, a life of love he freely shares with us. And, perhaps in that quiet place of prayer, where we've become aware in the depths of our souls of our own belovedness and the belovedness of all Creation and our connection with that Great Belovedness, and of the fragile and vulnerable preciousness of life, and how our vulnerable God, in Christ Jesus carries that fragility, bears our wounds, and renews us, we might ourselves come out renewed with a sense of purpose and a sense of connection, that by having been driven into the wilderness, and found our belovedness and protection in that wilderness, we can go out into the world and boldly proclaim God's Kingdom come near - a Kingdom of Justice, Healing, Forgiveness, Welcome, and Peace, and we can do this with a new confidence that is not our own self-confidence, but is part of the one Great Confidence that is Christ, knowing that in the fullness Christ all things will be well, and all manner of things will be well. Amen.