

How Can It Be?

The sermon will start with an illustration using 3 spin-able plates:

We are here at the start of lent considering the person of Jesus and how he embraced his relationship with God. There are 3 questions we will try to consider.

1. How can it be that Jesus was prepared to go into the wilderness, and should we be prepared to go in to the wilderness?
2. How can it be that Jesus was willing to stay in the wilderness, and should we be willing to stay in the wilderness?
3. How can it be that Jesus was able to leave the wilderness, and should we be able to leave the wilderness?

As we reflect on Jesus' nature, our own nature and the nature of this church; a church at the heart of the city with Christ at the heart of the church, we offer this time to God. Let us pray ... *may the words of my mouth and the meditation of all our hearts be worthy to You, our rock and redeemer.*

Lauren Daigle posed the question that it the basis of our service, "How can it be?" What a wonderfully vague but also searching question, how can it be?

How can it be that on the fifth day of the third month of the 2017 year after our Lord we are here today?

How can it be that we have food, shelter, work, rest, family and friends, when we know that there are those who do not have?

How can it be that we have opportunity and responsibility to be the people God wants us to be, when there are so many other challenges in our lives?

I could attempt to answer some of those questions but as we think back to our 3 spinning plates, we will try to consider, how can it be that Jesus went in to the wilderness, then stayed there, and then choose to leave? As we reflect on the these we will consider our own wildernesses and if there are any parallels for the church.

So, we need a starting point, a point of reference, "then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. (Matthew 4. 1)" Jesus was prepared to go into the wilderness because he had complete trust in God and God's plan for his life. Within Isaiah 53, we hear about the suffering servant, "He was despised and rejected by mankind, a man of suffering, and familiar with pain. (Isaiah 53. 3a)" As a rabbi Jesus knew that a Messiah would come and he knew that the Messiah would suffer. He clearly knew it was him and so he was prepared to go into the wilderness.

When we look back at the darker times within our lives do we see these as being tests from God? I remember dealing with the tragic death of my brother when non-Christian colleagues and friends, and they would say things like, "everything happens for a reason." I am not prepared to believe that God took my brother's life. I am willing to accept it is a culmination of his bravado and his employers naivety. That was a wilderness in my life but there is no way that this can parallel with Jesus' wilderness. A closer parallel is my current situation – I am trying to discern if I am being called to be a minister of Word and Sacrament. I have consciously been led into a wilderness where I am being tested, and I have my final test at the end of March, when I attend an assessment conference.

Is there an equivalent wilderness for the church? Yes, there will have been times when resources were low members, adherents and money but if you trace back then you will probably find that in hindsight the wrong choice was made, which created a problem. The equivalent wilderness experience for the church is a willingness to stop and reassess what is at the core. I mentioned last week about how you are reviewing the very essence of your vision and mission. For a church to be truly effective, we must be Christ-like and be led by the Spirit into the wilderness to know our true relationship with God.

The theme of our service is "How can it be?" which is a reference to the title track of Lauren Daigle's 2016 debut album "How can it be?". Her song starts with "I am guilty, ashamed of what I've done, what I've become. These hands are dirty, I dare not lift them up to the Holy one." In order to start the wilderness-experience, we need to recognise our humanity, our failings and our weaknesses in order to be led into the wilderness to be transformed.

Jesus was willing to stay in the wilderness, we are told that he stayed there for forty days and nights. This is the equivalent period that Moses stayed in the cloud with God (Exodus 24. 17) and Elijah walked to Mount Sinai (1 Kings 19. 8). All three fasted as preparation for their roles as God's agents for Israel. For Jesus, he faced three tests from Satan that tested his relationship with God, 1. Turn stones into bread, 2. Jump off a high tower, 3. You can have everything you can see, if you worship me. Jesus must have been at the very limit of his physical strength but he was able to maintain his steadfast love for God. For he responded to the temptations with complete resolve, 1. "Man shall not live on bread alone." 2. "Do not put the Lord your God to the test." And 3. "Worship the Lord your God, and serve Him only." All three responses come from Jesus' understanding of Deuteronomy 6.5, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength." For Jesus, this is the core of his faith. He was willing to stay in the desert to reveal his complete faith in his Father's plan.

I have been lent the book "How to be a bad Christian... and a better human being." By Rev. Dave Tomlinson. It is a collection of 17 extended sermons based on his ministry experiences working in inner-city London. They range from "God without the guff" and "Laughing with God." In chapter 15 "The quiet revolution" Dave considers "how to help God change the world." He refers to

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Lorenz's butterfly effect, whereby if something as minute as a butterfly flapping its wings could have the potential to start a chain reaction which would result in a tornado. One example he refers to is Rosa Parks refusing to move from her bus seat. Her small act of defiance became a starting point for the civil rights movement in the United States. After her arrest an unknown minister, Rev. Martin Luther King Jr was elected as the president of the Montgomery Improvement Association. Which, ultimately changed the course of equality for the better – I pray that that vision of equality is not lost as we look how recent politics has become, in marginalising the already marginalised.

From chapter 15 comes one thought on Jesus' willingness to stay in the wilderness (permission to reproduce has not been sort – reference p. 180 "How to be a bad Christian ...and a better human being." Dave Tomlinson © Hodder & Stoughton 2012)

"Don't try to change the world – be true to yourself; before entering the public arena, Jesus spent forty days in the desert deciding who he was and who he wanted to be in the world. He didn't do things simply to please others, or to fulfil some ambition to be the saviour of the world; he was simply true to his deepest and best instincts. If you are true to yourself, you will change the world, because the world around you will change."

To help us to become true to ourselves we need to be honest. Another piece of contemporary music that has influenced today's service is the song "If we're honest." By Francesca Battistelli. Within this song there are these words, "Don't pretend to be something that you're not, living life afraid of getting caught. There is freedom found when we lay our secrets down at the cross, at the cross."

The wilderness-experience is an opportunity to be transformed, transformed into our true nature. Jesus was willing to stay in the wilderness to become his true nature. The church in Philippi needed to be reminded of the true nature of Christ, as one commentary puts it, the passage is a manual. I am sure that there are many of you, me included, who buys a gadget and completely disregards the manual because we know better. We all need an example to follow and Christ is our example. He was willing to make, "himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. (Phil 2. 7)" In undertaking the wilderness-experience Jesus understood what he had to do, he was able to leave the wilderness and undertake his ministry.

His ministry brought admiration and derision, and he knew it would which is why Paul wrote in his manual, "he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death – even death on a cross! (Phil 2. 8)" That was his conviction throughout his ministry, knowing what had to happen, he was able to stick to his mission. Referring back to the song, "how can it be?" we get these words, "you plead my cause, you right my wrongs, you break my chains, you overcome. You gave Your life, to give me mine, You say that I am free." Jesus was able to leave the wilderness in order that he could be obedient to his death, death on a cross, for us. Are we able to leave our wilderness behind and embrace our mission, wherever it may take us?

Over the remaining days of this lent we may find ourselves in experiences that feel like a wilderness, where hope may seem lost, this forms a part of the rich tapestry of life. But lent is about understanding our relationship with God. How can it be that we must be led into the wilderness? It is because we need to know God for ourselves. How can it be that we must stay in the wilderness? It is because we need to become true to ourselves. How can it be that we must leave the wilderness? It is because we are all apart of God's plan and we must fulfil His mission.

So, as we think about what lent means to us consider the spinning plates. Which plates do you think God wants us to let go of? The Christian band Ten Avenue North in their song "You are more" remind us that we, "are not the sum of our past mistakes." So, let those plates that need to fall, fall at the foot of the cross, even if it is only the chocolate.

Which plates do you think God wants us to keep spinning? Because we have stayed in the wilderness we will know our true self and through that we will know that our mission may be to preach, teach, serve, listen, and it is through God He will help us to maintain those plates.

Which plates do you think God wants us to start spinning? In President Obamas's farewell speech he said,

"I am asking you to believe. Not in my ability to bring about change – but in yours."

So, perhaps we need to start spinning plates that will lead to our transformation.

How can it be that on the fifth day of the third month of the 2017 year after our Lord we are here today? I believe it is because we are a part of God's plan that needs us to embrace the wilderness; let us be led to it, immersed in it and transformed by it so that we have the confidence to be Christ-like, obedient to death but assured in the knowledge that death is not the end.

To God Be The Glory. Amen.