

Rev. Dr. Anne Bain Epling
Faith Des Peres Presbyterian Church
February 28, 2016
Lent 3
Luke 4: 1-13

“Endurance”

This Lent we’re looking at how Jesus was a boundary-breaker. Jesus continually defied the logic of his day when he went to places and spent time with people no one ever expected him to go or visit. In fact, I heard someone once say that Jesus didn’t go elsewhere because he was **rejected**, he was rejected **because** he went elsewhere.

Last week we looked at how we’re called to love people despite the differences we have with them, which is a challenge – we don’t see that happen much in our world – but it’s something Jesus did and calls us to do and when we do *do that*, we break boundaries.

Today, we’re going to be more introspective, and look at what it means to endure. What allows us to endure our darkest moments? What does it take to show resilience in the face of adversity? How do we break through, or work around, our internal boundaries, so that we can endure our wilderness times?

When we meet up with Jesus today he’s in the wilderness. He’s been there for 40 days. During that time he’s had to endure the temptations the devil throws at him. You probably already know that this story is normally referred to as the “Temptation of Jesus”. (And) if you read Amy Jill-Levine’s book, you know that the titles we give Bible stories greatly influence how we interpret them. In the case of today’s story, this is certainly true – the focus traditionally is on those temptations. But for some reason or another, I kept coming back to this idea of endurance. What if we titled this story “The Endurance of Jesus”? That changes the focus, doesn’t it? How did Jesus endure those 40 days? He must have been famished. No food, no water. And he must have been lonely without his friends and family there. How did he endure?

Now some of you may think that’s a pretty dumb question, because you might think of Jesus as having super-human strength. But the very idea of the incarnation teaches us just the opposite – that Jesus was fully human like us, in every way; so we should never assume that Jesus has some sort of special power we don’t.

Also, Jesus didn’t choose to go into the wilderness; the Holy Spirit led him there. Or as Mark says, “drove him there”, which certainly leads me to think this whole experience could have been against his will.

So how did he endure those 40 days? Did he have to break through a mental barrier in himself? And if so, what might that teach us about breaking through, or finding a way around, our own mental barriers so we can endure our wilderness times?

Now I’ve said to you before, but it’s worth reminding you, that wildernesses (in the symbolic sense) can take many different forms. Maybe your wilderness looked like a hospital waiting room, or a doctor’s office when you got news you really didn’t want to hear . . . maybe it looked like your empty office at work on the day you learned you were being let go, or maybe it was your empty office on the day of your retirement, when you realized you needed to forge a new identity for yourself; maybe your wilderness looks like the fellowship hall of a church where you go to find recovery and meet with other

addicts; or maybe it was a strange bed you slept in after getting kicked out of your house or getting divorced or going off to school or living in your first apartment because you had to re-learn how to navigate your way in the world.

The thing about being in the wilderness is that it's no fun, no fun at all. We're lost in the wilderness, and I don't know anyone who likes being lost. In the wilderness the old ways and habits and devices that kept us going and moving in a certain direction no longer work. Our cell phones don't get any reception and if we're there long enough they go dead. And since most of us aren't prepared to live in the wilderness, we haven't brought along our charger. So there we are, feeling very alone. What do we do now? How are we going to endure?

I listened recently to a TED talk given by Monica Lewinsky. She gave the talk in March 2015 – almost 20 years after, in her words, being “swept up into an improbable romance, and then (being) swept up into the eye of a political, legal and media maelstrom like we had never seen before.” For the first time, traditional news sources were usurped by the Internet, which led to mobs of virtual stone-throwers who called her every name imaginable. We now have a name for what happened to her, it's called cyber-bullying, but back then it was a new frontier, and Monica said there were days when she didn't know if she could go on; days when her Mom would make her shower with the bathroom door open for fear that she would be humiliated to death, literally.

Monica says the only thing that saved her was the empathy and compassion of family, friends, professionals, and sometimes strangers – people who reminded her that she was worthy enough. It was their empathy and compassion that gave her the strength and courage to endure.

The turning point for her in deciding to take back her narrative was the death of Tyler Clementi, the Rutgers University student who jumped to his death after being bullied online when his roommate posted secret footage of him being intimate with another man. It served to re-contextualize Monica's experience, pointing her to the fact that while cruelty to others is nothing new, technology allows it spread to more people, at a faster pace, than ever before. I've heard plenty of people my age and older say they are so thankful the internet wasn't around when they were in high school or college, because they're not sure they could have withstood the constant publicity it would have given them.

Within minutes of posting Monica's TED talk online, in fact in less time than it takes to actually watch her talk, the TED Talk people said the comment thread was deluged with hatred and vitriol. In fact, TED's social media editor said she broke down in tears reading the comments, and couldn't imagine how Monica had survived 17 years straight of those comments. The Ted people went to work deleting the harsh comments, for which they received more harsh comments, but as they did that and started to boost the positive ones – something started to happen. The haters started to realize their comments weren't welcome, while the thoughtful people realized theirs were. The social media editor wrote:

I think of that moment of sea change like a sort of herd immunity. The positive voices, when there are enough of them, keep abusive ones from spreading, just as a mostly vaccinated population protects those few people who are not.

This phenomenon is Monica's message in action. She asks us to be “upstanders,” to speak up and stand up for those who are victims of our culture of shame.

At the time of her TED Talk, people asked Monica why she was talking now. While some speculated that it could be about politics, Monica says that it was time she took back her narrative, and insist on a different ending to her story – because she had endured, and wants other people to know that they can endure, too. That no matter how deep in the wilderness you may find yourself, with the compassion and empathy of family and friends and professionals, and sometimes even strangers, you can endure.

As Researcher Brené Brown said, "Shame cannot survive empathy." Whether it's mean words, mean people, mean actions – or guilt, fear or hopelessness – these things seek to erode our confidence and undermine who we are and whose we are. In the case of today's story, the devil seeks to erode and undercut Jesus' confidence in his relationship with God and undermine his identity as God's beloved Son.

Jesus, of course, picks up on this, knows that the real temptation the devil offers is a familiar one: to be less than God created him to be and wanted him to be, to compromise his own integrity and authenticity as God's beloved.

In each temptation, the devil seeks to erode Jesus' confidence that he is enough, that he is worthy of God's love. But in the face of these temptations, Jesus quotes the sacred story of Israel in order to assert that he is a child of God, loved by God, and no one can take that away from him. That is how Jesus endures, by reminding himself that he is God's beloved, and that is enough. In fact, it is more than enough.

Friends, every day we are faced with messages or people who tell us that we are not smart enough, good enough, talented enough, pretty enough, strong enough, fast enough, rich enough, thin enough, tall enough, man enough, woman enough, or "you fill in the blank" enough. In countless ways, by countless people, we are tempted to lose our faith in God and confidence in ourselves. But I want you to know, and to be assured that God loves you more than anything; that God loves you enough to send Christ into our world to take on our lot in life, to endure the same temptations and wildernesses we endure, to be rejected and even die so that we may know that God is with us and for us. And in the resurrection we see that God's love is more powerful than hatred, and the life God offers is more than powerful than death. In here, we are reminded that we are God's beloved, and that is enough to endure. In fact, it is more than enough to endure if we can just remember it.

But I'd also ask you to remember, the next time you find yourself being judgmental, or taking part in the culture of shame and humiliation, or the next time you find yourself being the compassionate and empathetic one for someone else, remember the story of the Israelites, the one we heard today. They spent 40 years in the wilderness; 40 years. Before they stepped foot in the Promised Land, God told them to remember. Remember, God said, the time you spent here, and remember that I was faithful to you when you were here. And then God gives them a command, a command that runs throughout the Torah: "You shall love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt." Be empathetic to those who are in the wilderness; support them with your kindness and prayers; don't cast judgment; be a reflection of God's love and concern for them, for when we do that we break boundaries, and make Christ known.

Amen.

Sources:

<http://ideas.ted.com/want-to-help-prevent-online-bullying-comment-on-facebook/>

www.davidlose.net, commentary for Lent 1C

TED Radio Hour podcast, "To Endure"