
How Will You Choose to Live in the Desert?

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Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

Do you remember the first time you really had to confront that you were not the sole author of your life? I do.

It was a warm day in late spring or early summer of 1982. School had let out for the year and I was preparing to enter high school. I was thirteen years old. Our car was loaded to the brim with belongings that had not made their way onto the moving truck. Our black and white cat, Samantha, was yowling indignantly in response to the medication that was meant to make her sleep on the long drive to Michigan.

My best friend from junior high was standing under the basketball net in the carport with me. We were face to face with the reality that we would no longer be seeing each other every day. All of my pleas with my parents, my suggested alternative parenting arrangements, had come to naught.

In that moment, we believed naively that we would always remain best friends. We swore to it in our yearbooks and signed our letters, BFA, best friend always. We knew if we were steadfast, this change could not and would not change our relationship. As our car backed out onto the street, my face was pressed to the back window. I'll never forget the sight of Christy running after the car, tears streaming down her face, waving until we were out of sight. I was a prisoner in my own life. Trapped in a backseat I would never have chosen.

I would love to report that I reacted to this change with maturity and grace. I would love to say that I didn't blame my parents and I decided early on to make the best of it. But let's be real. I was thirteen. I'm sure the odds were not in my favor.

The reality is that I reacted in a selfish and self indulgent manner. I was a monster to live with and did not care for one minute whether this move was better for the rest of my family. It was all about me. I was sullen for the whole summer, and frankly spent my first year of high school not doing that well academically.

I vowed, at least subconsciously, to not make this place my new life. I was in the desert. I was in exile. But rather than looking for manna or sustenance, I was griping about missing the Smithsonian, hating my new school with its backward curriculum, and quite sure none of these new people I met could ever match up with my old friends. I chose to be parched and sunburned, rather than looking for water and shade.

Eventually my rage dissipated and I began to grudgingly participate in my new life. I was even happy. But, I'm not sure I ever fully chose it. I still quip about the name of Mt. Pleasant being a misnomer, since the town was flat and anything but pleasant. But as I have gotten older, I wonder whether clinging to that image of my old life, fading into the distance, with

tears streaking its face was a gift or a curse. While we need to grieve our losses, we also need to claim the gifts that come from our inevitable periods of exile.

My sense of happiness and security that was so wrenching to let go of was tied to a particular location and set of circumstances. It was formulaic and terribly unrealistic. If we can only be happy or faithful when things follow our expectations, we will find ourselves in a constant place of challenge. We will feel isolated and alienated from God. We become as stuck as the early people of Israel. If there is not a pillar of cloud and fire to follow, or the expected returns from the stock market or our good behavior, we are lost, abandoned.

Recently, we have had many experiences of finding ourselves in the back seats of cars we are not driving. Our financial security, our safety, and our happiness have been challenged. We see increased unemployment, decimated retirement resources, and violent and senseless deaths. Our noses are pressed to the back window as we watch our most prized notions about life fading in the distance.

It is hard and we are reacting in many predictable ways. We are terrified. We are angry. We have tears streaming down our faces. We are looking for someone in the front seat to blame. We are in the desert. We are in exile.

And now we have an important choice to make.

Is this the life we will claim and invite God into, or not?

Lent give us an opportunity this year to willingly choose to be where we have already been taken. The wilderness. We are face to face with the fact that our life is not solely in our control. It is one thing to let go of things we need and want to let go of. To take on new and helpful disciplines that can positively impact our lives.

But what about the times we have to let go of things we dearly love and don't want to even think about parting with? Can Lent help with that? It seems paradoxical, but it also seems true. Because, Lent is not about picking up where our New Year's resolutions left off. It is about consenting to enter more deeply into the paschal mystery of Christ's death and resurrection.

There is a big difference between choosing the desert and the places that scare us, or fighting against them at every turn. One reaction gives us the possibility of sustenance in the dry places. The other moves us towards a spiritless survival mode.

The good news sometimes comes to us in less than happy clothing. On the very day we smudge our foreheads with symbols of our finitude and inevitable death, we dare to claim a hope beyond that inevitability.

Even the Gospel lesson's caution against public displays of piety, reminds us that outward actions can sometimes become an end in themselves. Rather than drawing us deeper into the mystery of God, we inadvertently limit our ability to experience God.

If we can't make the bold claim that our suffering and confusion is accompanied by God, where does that leave us? That is the hard work of Lent and it is strangely the best preparation we have for Easter.

It is tempting to hope that we can find the joy of resurrection without the journey to the cross. My thirteen year old self sure wishes that was true. But deep down we know better. We may flail against the suffering that inevitably comes into our life, but as people of faith we claim it is not the last word. As people of faith, we realize we have not been offered an immunization against the pain of the world but a capacity to experience it in a different way.

Our faith offers us something even better than the avoidance or complete control. It offers us the God of love who promises that no matter how bad it gets, how much we rebel, how much we don't like it---we will never be alone. Never.

God has come to earth in flesh and blood to forever bond our suffering with the inevitable joy of new life. Resurrection is coming. And it comes to the desert. It comes to the backseat of the car when our eyes are only turned backward.

So we have a choice to make. Will we invite God in or not? God is hard to hear if we are engaged in a spiritual temper tantrum. God will still be there, but we won't be likely to feel it.

We are in the desert. We are in exile. But we are not alone. How will we choose? Choose the deep waters. Choose the shade. Choose the firm foundation of God's love.

Amen

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