

SERMON

Year A, Lent 1

A mother camel and her baby are talking one day and the baby camel asks, “Mama, why have we got these huge three-toed feet?”

The mother replies, “To enable us to trek across the soft sand of the desert without sinking.”

And the baby camel asks “And why have we got these long, heavy eyelashes?”

“To keep the sand out of our eyes on the trips through the desert” replies the mother camel.

And the baby camel asks “And Mama, why have we got these big humps on our backs?”

She replies, “They are there to help us store fat for our long treks across the desert, so we can go without water for long periods.”

“OK, I get it!” says the baby camel, “We have huge feet to stop us from sinking, long eyelashes to keep the sand from our eyes and humps to store water.

Then, Mama, why the heck are we here in the Bronx Zoo?

Modern life sometimes makes one feel like a camel in a zoo.

And like camels in a zoo, we need sometimes to go into the desert in order to discover who we truly are.

Lent invites us to enter into this kind of desert experience.

The Bible is full of stories of wilderness journeys.

In fact, this seems to be one of God's favorite stories, because God tells us this story again and again.

God also seems particularly fond of the number 40.

God seems to enjoy calling people from out of the places where they are settled and comfortable to go into the wilderness.

Get up! Go out!

The Israelites were called out of Egypt, out of their bondage and slavery, out of Pharaoh's courts....and into the wilderness, for 40 long years.

"Come," God said to Moses.

And so Moses left the Israelites encamped in their tents and went up to God on the mountaintop.

Moses spent 40 days and nights on Mount Sinai.

God commands Noah to build an ark and it rains for 40 days and nights.

A suicidal Elijah flees to the desert, running for his life.

He, too, spends 40 days and nights in the wilderness before hearing God command: “Go out and stand on the mountain before the Lord, for the Lord is about to pass by.”

Today’s Gospel tells us that Jesus was full of the Holy Spirit. Now Jesus is very clear on the fact that he is the son of God. And yet it is the Spirit that drives Jesus out into the wilderness anyway.

Well, that’s a story with no surprises.

Jesus knows who he is.

We know that Jesus is not going to get disgruntled in the wilderness and pound out a golden calf for himself.

And when the tempter shows up on the scene, slinging his guns and firing off one temptation after another, we know that Jesus is going to win the show-down with Satan in the dust and the hot sun.

Why the wilderness, then?

Why does the Spirit drive Jesus into the wilderness?

To show us how it's done.

In the wilderness, Satan the tempter pulls out his entire bag of tricks to try to get Jesus to forget who he really is and what he's really there for.

Satan does his best to distract Jesus from his true identity: God's man.

Satan is dangling the bait before Christ, but Christ, being Christ, doesn't bite.

Jesus knows who he is, and to whom he belongs.

Jesus goes out into the wilderness to show us how it's done.

Jesus walks out into the wilderness ahead of us to show us how to dwell so deeply in God that even the temptations of Satan cannot do us in.

Jesus goes out into the wilderness before us ***and every day with us*** so that we, wilderness people that we are, never, ever forget who we belong to.

In the desert we come to know ourselves, our strengths and weaknesses, and our divine calling.

In the desert Jesus encountered beasts and angels.

There are wild beasts and angels in every one of us.

Sometimes, we fail to recognize the wild beast in us and give in to our pride, or we fail to recognize the angel in us and give in to self-hatred.

But in the silence and recollection of the desert, we come to terms with ourselves as we really are.

We are reconciled with the beasts and the angels in our lives and then we begin to experience peace for the first time.

Lent is the time for the desert experience.

We cannot all afford to buy a camel and head off for the desert.

But we can all create a desert space in our overcrowded lives.

We can set aside a place and time to be alone daily with God, a time to distance ourselves from the many noises and voices that bombard our lives every day, a time to hear God's word, a time to rediscover who we are before God, a time to say yes to God and no to Satan as Jesus did.

God's Spirit is driving us into the wilderness now, just for a little while, just until we know, yes *until we know*, deep down in the depths of who we are, that we are the people of God.

And when we go out of this place today, into the dead deserts of the places where we must live, and do battle, and face the tempter's tricks: *Let us not forget who we are.*

We are God's daughters, we are God's sons: the most dearly,
deeply, endlessly beloved of God.

And with us, God is very, very pleased.

Amen