

AUDEMUS

To Members of the Board of Trustees and Close Friends of San Francisco Theological Seminary

FEBRUARY/MARCH 2017

Dear friends,

We find ourselves in the wilderness. In the Biblical story, wilderness is the land of in-between, a place of ambiguity, of God present and God hidden. The Biblical texts highlight this when they say that Jesus entered the wilderness “led by the Spirit” and “tempted by the Devil.” Wilderness is the place Jesus found himself after his baptism, but before his public ministry. At this point in his life, Jesus knew he had been called by God, was God’s Son, and that his life would serve to redeem the world.

But the question was How? How would Jesus accomplish what God had sent him to do? How would Jesus save the world? It’s that question that took him into the wilderness – led by the Spirit and tempted by the Devil.

When Jesus enters the wilderness, it is his most vulnerable moment. He is alone and hungry. Perhaps he’s even overwhelmed by the responsibilities laid upon him and the path that lies ahead. It can be confusing. Jesus’s 40 days in the wilderness recapitulates the experience of Moses and Israel for the 40 years after they left Egypt. Who *were* they, now that they were no longer slaves, no longer under the thumb of Pharaoh, no longer defined by their oppression? What was their *identity*? What held them together? To whom did they owe allegiance?

Was the God who had led them out of Egypt *still* with them as they wandered in the desert, lacking bread or meat, losing their way, experiencing obstacles and set-backs, suffering from the heat, from exhaustion, nearly dying?

Wilderness wandering sows doubts, feeds our fears, and fuels our frustrations and insecurities. Because we have not arrived, because the journey is uncertain and the outcome far from clear, wilderness wandering undermines our self-confidence. We are neither what we once were, nor yet what we desire to become.

Will we make it? Can we do it? Those are the questions that define our wilderness experience. It’s the place where misgivings and second thoughts are easily nurtured.

“Maybe I should take this short cut.” “Maybe I should turn back to the way things were before.” “Maybe this whole idea is too hard or too harebrained to pursue.” That’s what happens in the wilderness. Choices are offered and decisions must be made. That’s our freedom as human beings.

The reality is, much of our lives is spent trying to overcome our fears, anxieties, and feelings of powerlessness. We try to strengthen our hand, to arm ourselves, to destroy that which we fear will rule or dominate us. We seek comfort and security, and we’re willing to pay most any price to achieve them. In myriad ways, we steel ourselves against the harsh realities of life, especially the realities of suffering, poverty and deprivation. We build walls that exclude. We erect defenses against enemies, known and unknown, real or imagined. In this way we are very far from understanding and celebrating either the gift of the Incarnation or the victory of Easter.

Jesus’ own temptation was to take the crown and avoid the cross. Taken together, his temptations signify the offer to settle for less, to trade the prospect of real change for the mere appearance of change, to exchange short-term success—power, wealth, prestige, privilege—for transforming the world.

||||| WE DECIDE WE DARE WE DO |||||

The good news of the Gospel is that Jesus chose to refuse the immediate security and comfort offered by the Devil in order that he might become life-giving, death-defying bread for a world of hungry people.

In the wilderness Jesus was fearful, but he resisted the temptations by loving God more than power, status, the status quo, or material goods. Jesus resisted his temptations in order to show us how to resist ours, and ultimately how to become the people God created us to be by serving God and loving one another.

Just so, Lent is a time to confront our fears, our weaknesses, our hungers, our loneliness and alienation. Lent invites us into the wilderness to discover anew the mind of Christ Jesus, “who though he was in the form of God, counted equality with God not a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross.” (Philippians 2:5-8)

The evil in our time is a particularly ugly spirit that is loose in our world, a spirit of meanness, callousness, and cynicism; a spirit of fear, arrogance, and swagger. There is a lack of civility, a desire to dominate and exploit others and the earth, a wanton disregard for those who suffer from violence, poverty, hunger, oppression, and persecution.

The temptation for us as Christians is to put our trust in something other than the God of love, and the love of God. We cannot bow down before other gods. We cannot seek to satisfy our personal needs and desires at the expense of our neighbors or the earth. Neither can we seek the false security of relying on self-proclaimed saviors. We must align ourselves with the God who loved the world—not simply those who call themselves Christian, not only the Church, not a particular nation, but the world—so much that the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and was willing to die for us while we were yet sinners. That’s grace and it’s truth. It’s the proof of God’s amazing love.

So, if we put our trust in the God of love, then we must confront the evil of our time, the evil of lies and hatred, of tribalism and fear. We cannot acquiesce to the “hosts of evil ‘round us”—that too is a sin. We cannot leave it to God to sort it out. We ourselves must repent, must turn around, must find our personal response to the evil of our time. And we must act.

Wisdom and courage to each of you on your Lenten journey,



Rev. Dr. James L. McDonald,
President and Professor of Faith and Public Life

P.S. – Thank you for your support and prayers for SFTS! We have already raised as much money this year as in all of last year. With your continued financial support, we may break a record for giving this year. Remember, too, that every new dollar raised this year is being matched by a generous group of SFTS trustees.



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