

Lent 1, Year A
Matthew 4: 1-11

Trinity Episcopal Church
Sonoma, California

Questions in the Desert:
A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Susan Allison-Hatch

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German pastor, theologian and prisoner of the Nazis wrote from the desert that was his prison cell

Who am I? They often tell me
I stepped from my cell's confinement
calmly, cheerfully, firmly,
like a *Squire* from his country house.

Who am I? They often tell me
I used to speak to my warders
freely and friendly and clearly,
as though it were mine to command.

Who am I? They also tell me
I bore the days of misfortune
equitably, smilingly, proudly,
like one accustomed to win.

Am I then really that which other men tell of?
Or am I only what I myself know of myself?
Restless and longing and sick, like a bird in a cage,...
weary and empty at praying, at thinking, at making,
faint, and ready to say farewell to it all.

Who am I? This or the other?
Am I one person today and tomorrow another?
Am I both at once?...

"Who am I? They mock me, these lonely questions of mine," Bonhoeffer says as he ends his poem.ⁱ

Cast into an alien environment, removed from all that was familiar, all that was comfortable, Dietrich Bonhoeffer found himself struggling with that most fundamental question – who am I?

That's the question Jesus is forced to answer in his face off in the desert – who am I?

I can imagine how hard that question was for him. After all, for over thirty years he had been simply Jesus of Nazareth, the carpenter's son. Then, quite suddenly, he hears the voice of God saying, "This is my son, the beloved, with him I am well pleased." And equally as suddenly the Spirit whisks Jesus off to the desert.

Cast into an alien environment, removed from all that was familiar, all the landmarks of his life, Jesus of Nazareth finds himself struggling with the question "Who am I?". I imagine him forty days in the desert fasting and praying, forty days puzzling over the questions "Who am I" and "What does it mean to be the Son of God." And then his tempter comes upon him:

"If you are the Son of God, make these stones into bread."

"If you really are the Son of God, take your power and feed yourself and feed others as well."

"If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down for it is written... 'On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.'"

"If you really are the Son of God, prove yourself – make a miracle happen right now in front of all those people gathered in the temple courts."

To the tempter Jesus, quoting scripture, replies:

"One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God."

"Do not put the Lord your God to the test."

"Worship the Lord your God and serve only him."

Jesus doesn't take the bait. Those weeks in the wilderness, those days and nights in the desert, that time of fasting and praying are doing their work. Jesus has begun to live his answer to the questions, "Who am I" and "What does it mean to be the Son of God." Jesus has begun to trust in the grace of God.

So it was with Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Not long after he wrote that poem, he came to an answer to his own questions. He wrote, "It is not the religious act that makes the Christian, but participation in the sufferings of God in the secular life." Bonhoeffer goes on to say that repentance "consists not in the first place thinking about one's own needs, problems, sins and fears, but allowing oneself to be caught up in the way of Jesus Christ."ⁱⁱ

From the desert that was his prison cell, Bonhoeffer found the answer to his lonely questions. "Who am I?" His answer: "A fellow sufferer with God in the midst of life."

You and I, we, too, have our desert spaces and places. We, too, have encountered the wilderness in our lives. We, too, have been cast into alien environments where all our familiar landmarks have gone missing. We, too, have wondered, “Who am I?” and “Why is this happening to me?” We all have such times in our lives. I know from my own life how disorienting such places can be. Questions of survival occupy all your attention. Often, when you’re in those desert spaces and places, it’s hard to answer questions about identity – you don’t have the time, the energy, the reserves to look for answers.

However, Lent is a season that invites us to take the time to explore the question, “Who am I?”.

Lent is a season that invites us to step into the desert – a place stripped of distractions – and to reflect both as individuals and as a community on who we are as children of God, what it means for us to call ourselves Christian, and what is asked of us.

Lent is a season that asks us to take the time to notice the obstacles that are keeping us from living fully into our true identity as sons and daughters of God, as brothers and sisters in the Body of Christ.

On Ash Wednesday the priest says to the congregation, “I invite you, therefore, in the name of the Church, to the observance of a holy Lent, by self-examination and repentance; by prayer, fasting, and self-denial; and by reading and meditating on God’s holy Word.”

Step with me into the desert. Let the clarity of its light, the barrenness of its landscape, the breadth of its vistas, the absence of distractions, provide each of us and all of us time and space to reflect on the questions, “Who am I” and “Who are we as part of the Body of Christ?” Let us join with Dietrich Bonhoeffer in following Jesus into the desert and through the lonely questions back to the midst of life. Amen.

ⁱ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Letters and Papers from Prison, pp347-348.

ⁱⁱ *Ibid.*, p. 361