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This is the first Sunday in Lent, and like every first Sunday in Lent, we hear of Jesus' time in the wilderness, where he stays for 40 days, before the start of his public ministry. Jesus fasts and prays. He is tempted by the devil.

As I have reflected on this Gospel reading this week, I am realizing that I have often read this story as a sort of superhero versus supervillain encounter. Jesus is hungry. The devil says, make yourself some bread! Maybe with an evil cackle. Jesus quotes scripture, throws fire from his palm. Shazaam! Score one, Jesus! Take that, Satan! And so on.

In other words, I have often glossed over the real pain and struggle in this story. I have made it into a cartoon version. I have forgotten Jesus is human, he really is starving, he feels the pulls, the temptations, inside himself.

He is really hungry. He is really tempted. And we can see it a little in his responses to the devil.

As he is struggling with the devil's tests, Jesus calls upon scripture, and not just any scripture. All of the texts Jesus quotes to the devil are from the book of Deuteronomy, God's instructions, God's law spoken through Moses. Jesus uses Torah, the precious gift given to God's people, as his shield. Jesus is struggling mightily, and he basically pulls out his strongest and most powerful tools to help him fight.

I noticed as I read this story this week that Jesus never addresses God directly. It is just Jesus and the devil and God's word through the book of Deuteronomy. Now Jesus had been praying for forty days. And I would imagine in that time he was talking to God, maybe also listening for God's voice, a lot. Why wouldn't he call out to God to help him with these tests by the devil?

I wonder. I wonder if his prayer to God had gone through some things. I wonder if at first there were a lot of words, thanks for his call, his special relationship with God, noticing all the beauty in the wilderness, praying for strength and clarity. I wonder if as the days and weeks went by, his prayer became more desperate, more pleading. God, help me not feel this hunger. God, it's so cold at night, help me sleep. And finally, God, Where are you? Why aren't you answering me?

By the time the devil shows up, maybe Jesus has given up on calling out directly to God. He has given up on asking, when there have not been any answers. And so instead he pulls out scripture, God's word, as his help.

This story of Jesus in the wilderness is not some kind of display of powers, good versus evil, to prove to us how strong and holy Jesus is. Jesus suffers, he is severely tested, he leans on God in the only way he has left, and he is consoled in the end.

This is a story some of us have lived. We have been in the wilderness. Through a life transition -- retirement, an illness, the death of a loved one -- we have gone through a time that feels isolating, unknown, stark and frightening. The familiar is gone. There is no clear path. It can be dark, and cold, and we are hungry for more than just food.

We have collectively gone through wilderness times. COVID was such a time. We may be in such a time right now.

We who know the wilderness, we who have had a wilderness time, we probably called out to God for help. Send me a sign. Send me a new job, a cure, bring that person back or at least help me stop hurting so much. Stop this violence and injustice. We may have prayed mightily to a god in the sky, wanting that god to rain down something, anything, on us. And we may have found that god to be painfully silent in our time of need.

We may have given up on praying altogether. We may have given up on God. Or perhaps, not totally given up. Maybe we kept going through the motions, coming to worship, saying the prayers, being present with our bodies but not sure exactly what we were doing or why.

After a time, if we were lucky, we came out of the wilderness. We found new purpose in life. Someone new showed us how to love again. Our sickness was cured, or we learned how to be in our body in a new way.

For some of us, none of those things happened, and yet we still came into a new way of being. We found a new sense of peace, a new presence of God. It was not a sky god who sends down favors. It was something more mysterious, something present around us, and deep inside us. A sense that everything was going to be ok, even if it wasn't.

I think Jesus may have gone through something like this. He went into the wilderness full of zeal and confidence, brimming with excitement and eager to start his service to God his father. Forty days in, all of that was shattered. His simple images of God had been broken down. He had to lean into his tradition and just trust that God was there.

Because he did that, Jesus reached a place of peace, a place of consolation, a greater sense of his connection to God, a sense of his divinity that was deeper and stronger than before.
Because he struggled, Jesus came to an even more powerful place. A place where he could use his connectedness to God, his divinity, for others. Jesus will walk out of that desolate wilderness, that place of testing, to travel, teach, to heal, to give everything he has and everything he is, with love.

St Martin's, this is our spiritual journey too. This is the purpose of our Lenten practices. Not to be spiritual superheroes, not to show we can tough it out, but to struggle, and stumble, and wonder if it's all fruitless as we reach for something deeper. We are not Jesus. We are not going to go forth and save the world. Well actually, who knows? Maybe we too can go beyond our wilderness place. Maybe we too can find the spark of the divine inside us, and use it for the healing of the world. Amen.