

The Desert

sermon by Marcel Rebiai

I will start by reading 3 related texts. The first is Matt. 4:1-3, "Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the desert to be tempted by the devil. After fasting forty days and forty nights, he was hungry. The tempter came to him..."

The second text is Matt. 6:21, "For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."

And the last one is Rev. 12:11, "They overcame him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony; they did not love their lives so much as to shrink from death."

What do these three texts have to do with each other? A lot, I believe, for our on-going theme as Jesus' disciples is loving him and following him. On this path of discipleship we are promised the fullness of life. As we read in John 10:10, "I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full." But if we are honest, our experience often suggests something quite different. We certainly do not always experience this fullness. Why do so many Christians struggle through life with a great void of peace, joy, comfort and calm?

In order to come up with some answers we must ask ourselves initially why we became Christians in the first place. It is seldom solely love for Jesus which motivates a person to make a decision to follow him. I believe that this decision is often based on an instinct for self-preservation. Some decide from fear of hell, which is a legitimate reason; because without salvation through Jesus' cross we would surely be lost. But this has everything to do with ourselves and little to do with God. Others became Christians because they hoped for Jesus' help and support in their marriage; still others because they could not cope with life and thus accepted the offer to become whole, to receive a helping hand to get out of their troubles.

These are all legitimate motives, for Jesus himself calls to us, "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest (help you). Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light" (Matt. 11:28-30).

Selfish motives

We come to God in order to receive something. We want to be helped and to be whole. Our eyes are fixed firmly on ourselves. Our motives are selfish. And God knows this! Because he knows our hearts to their core. He is not deceived. But God's greatness becomes visible precisely when he is concerned with us, in spite of our egoism. He accepts us as we are.

Our first steps toward Jesus are usually selfish. We can even serve him or go to the mission field from egotistic motives. But God does not want to merely gratify our acute hunger. He doesn't only want to lead us into the fullness of life. He wants to lead us close to his heart - for we can find rest nowhere else. So he does not leave us as we are. He must familiarize us with the integrity of his kingdom. According to these principles, it is not those who grab for life who find it, but rather those who let themselves fall into God's hands and lose their lives.

If we don't realize this we will never really understand what it is to be Jesus' disciple. But God is so great that he gives us peace and joy when we take our first selfish steps. Everyone who has truly encountered Jesus knows what it is when God's wonderful peace fills their hearts. At these times we get the impression that now all is well. We have encountered Jesus. Our lives belong to him. We love him and we belong to his congregation. Filled and enraptured with this gift of God we feel close to him and love him. We are certain that now nothing adverse can happen to us.

But then comes the inevitable, which under all circumstances must come: the next step! Jesus says to us, "We must go on! I have set the table for you in the presence of your enemies. You have eaten and drunk; I have strengthened you. Now we must go on!"

The challenge to set out for the desert

Being saved, receiving forgiveness and salvation is only the sustenance which gives me appropriate strength to set out for the desert, towards my mountain of God where I will in truth encounter God - and myself. The desert is not always an external reality. It is usually an inner condition of our souls, a period of darkness and drought. In this desert God will ask me about my deepest motives. He will reveal his heart to me. He will call me to follow after his son in order to transform me into his image. Previously I had not even been a disciple! I had been merely a guest at Jesus' table. He nourished me and relieved me of my burden. And while we were still sitting at the table, the challenge arose. As we read, "Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the desert."

This is where the path to discipleship begins. Discipleship means following after Jesus, being led into the same challenges that he was. Jesus says of himself, "Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head" (Lk. 9:58). And of his disciples, "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me" (Matt. 16:24). Jesus forces no one to be his disciple. But if we want to follow him he cannot spare us the confrontation with ourselves and with the conditions of discipleship. In the desert God reveals the true condition of our hearts. The Holy Spirit must lead us deeper into truth. The desert begins to gnaw at us. We get hungry and thirsty. Our senses cry for satisfaction, for peace, even for the numbness of no feeling at all.

But God doesn't come back on our cries. He seems silent, unmoved by our need. Instead of satisfying our hunger for comfort, joy, peace and security, the dam walls of suppression inside us begin to burst. Our inner being finds a path to the surface. Suppressed emptiness, existential fears, inferiority feelings, self-rejection, loneliness, bitterness, accusations and anger erupt out of a boiling heart and clog the mouth with bitter gall.

In the desert all the hitherto locked inner rooms are unbolted. Nothing can remain hidden. The light must shine into every dark corner so that the truth can penetrate and transform our hearts. In his goodness, God continues to lead us ever deeper into the desert during the course of our discipleship. Thus he reveals the mystery of our transformation into the image of his son. None of us would be able to bear the knowledge of our heart's need of salvation if it were revealed all at once.

Our initial reaction to this process is usually confusion, disappointment and doubt. We don't understand what is happening. The familiar peace has evaporated. We no longer understand God; his word no longer speaks to us as once it did. We have the impression that we are suddenly much worse off than before we lived with Jesus.

The spirit also led Jesus into the desert. These desert periods are always at the beginning of an encounter with God in which he wants to engrave the mysteries of his kingdom deeper into a person's heart. Without these desert phases we would never really know the true condition of our relationship with Jesus, or how serious we are about discipleship. The desert is absolutely necessary in order for God's spirit to lead us into truth. The Holy Spirit is the one who reveals Jesus to us; he must therefore lead us into the desert, into our personal desert.

The wilderness is the place where God's wind sweeps away all the chaff and straw, all the void and meaninglessness, all the noise and numbness. This lays the naked foundation exposed and illuminates the fundamental starkness. Illusions and day-dreams with which I covered up my wretched reality dissolve painfully before my heart's burning eyes. Even God's care, which used to fill me during praise, when I read his word, when I was quiet in his

presence, or in the fellowship of friends and other believers (yes, this sometimes intoxicated me like a good book or film, or whatever else I used for relaxation) is taken from me. It recedes so far that I lose all appetite for it.

There are periods in our lives when too many emotions, even in our relationship with God, can distract us from the essential work on our hearts. For the sake of the truth, God must hold himself back. He must bring me to the place where at last everything which was in my heart is revealed and where I experience the truth about myself; to the place where no further suppression is possible, no further distraction is effective; neither religion, hedonism nor culture. We know, after all, that God's enemy is not choosy about the means employed to prevent us from experiencing the truth about ourselves and about God. This makes the desert absolutely necessary.

Encounter with my true self

When we look into our own eyes in the desert, we will encounter our true self. This self is normally filled with self-rejection and with accusations against our own personal history; because fear, insecurity and homelessness dominate our lives. Rebellion against the path God gave us is not only the usual reaction, but we discover that it's like a chronic illness we can't shake off. Only then do we begin to sense our heart's unimaginable need of salvation. We discover how hurriedly we mistrust God and turn from him when things don't develop as we had expected. Then God must expose us to the enemy's attacks in order to reveal the true state of our relationship to him.

On the one hand, the desert is a fruitless wilderness of solitude and homelessness, where an unprotected, solitary person is constantly surrounded by death. Therefore it is the home of demons, and the devil is very present. On the other hand, the same desert can be a jewel of beauty and a sea of peace and glory when God's breath fills it with his whisperings, when he lays hold of the unplumbed depths of our soul. God speaks and acts in the desert. God's spirit led Jesus into the desert and exposed him to the attacks, the questions and above all the lies of the devil.

This method is necessary in order to prepare and equip us, because the path of discipleship will take us through a world ruled by God's enemy. I must go to the desert to learn the difference between God's voice and the devil's. Such a wilderness is the framework of training. There God's spirit familiarizes me with the strategy of "the liar and accuser of the brethren". He teaches me to recognize the devil's wiles. I learn to differentiate between the devil's lies and God's truth, between light and darkness, pride and humility. Then I can see Jesus' footprints and stay on the path in a world marked by deception and pride. This I can learn only in the desert.

The test

What do we usually experience in the desert? Our first impression, as we have observed, is that God has abandoned us, because we no longer feel him nor hear his voice. We lose our desire to pray and read God's word. Everything in and around us is empty and dull. The needs of our soul and our spirit are no longer satisfied. We no longer feel peace. Our life with God becomes dehydrated and shrivels up. Nothing has any taste. Love for God becomes purely an act of the will. It no longer boosts me.

If we don't cover up and whitewash this condition with a façade of activities and consumerism, but allow our heart to speak, our inner dam walls begin to disintegrate. The negative things in our heart surface. Accusations, disappointment, anger and resignation emerge.

Then the devil comes and says, "You see, your conversion, your so-called experiences with God are nothing but religious emotionalism. You just fell for what people said." The enemy lies to us according to our present relationship to God. He says, "Look, there's no solution for your present situation! God may be a god who heals, but you aren't on his list. He doesn't see you. God heals and liberates, but you're so wounded and imprisoned, your past is so difficult that there's little hope." The devil doesn't say that God doesn't heal, that he doesn't work in our lives or that he isn't present. He says, "You're a special case. God can help, but there are certain cases even he can't solve and you're one of them. Your case is more complicated than others."

Lying is the devil's weapon. He comes and tells us, "You have to learn to live with your situation. You must accept that this is the way you are and that you can't change yourself. It's just a shortcoming in your character that you can't open up to others; that it's hard for you to let others see into your heart. Not much can be done about this. This is easier for some people." In this way the devil begins filling us with lies. His goal in the desert is that we see ourselves as victims - victims of God's demands and calling or victims of our past, our up-bringing or other circumstances. He wants us to feel sorry for ourselves because then we won't take responsibility or give account for our thoughts and actions. We will experience neither repentance – nor forgiveness and a new beginning.

The enemy of God and man always approaches us at our point of weakness. He drags us down by converting our weaknesses into paralysis. Whatever my weakness - self-pity, lack of courage, resignation, fear or mistrust - if I don't put it in God's hands, the devil will always use it as a weapon against me. In our struggle for genuine discipleship Satan will always pressurize us with the lie that radical discipleship and total openness and honesty are only for saints, not for the weak. A John Smith like myself must not overdo it. We need only read books about saints. What they went through is not for people with little strength of character. This perseverance is much more than you and I could muster in order to fulfil the radical demands of discipleship which in fact is a matter of relinquishing our own goals and dreams. It's a matter of a life without guarantee of visible success, recognition or security; without hope for an empire of our own, however small.

Temptation allowed

God allows temptation. When my heart is revealed I must ask myself whether I am willing to believe God's word and his promises - namely that he will lead me into life through darkness, problems and struggles if I lay my life in his hands. When it comes to letting go of our own lives, rebellion, lack of faith, pride, inferiority feelings, fear and cowardice can rear up like an impenetrable wall between us and God.

But God brings us to the point where he asks, "Are you really ready to follow after me, even when it costs you everything? Are you willing, even if I don't always give you pleasure; if you have to pass through times of dryness and darkness, if things don't always go well? Even if you lose a child, your spouse or your friends? Or are you willing to follow me only as long as I fulfil your desires?"

Love for God is a relationship, born of the unconditional decision to belong to him, anchored in the heart attitude described in Ps. 73:25, "Whom have I in heaven but you? And being with you, I desire nothing on earth." Love is a question of my decision, whether my desires are fulfilled or not. It is a matter of seeking God as a person and not his riches or his gifts. The desert makes it plain whether I live from the nourishment of the world or from God's word. God seeks my entire dedication. He wants to be my sole source of life. Dedication is saying yes to God's paths in spite of all opposition. "Lord, I want to go with you; I trust you that you really are the one you have promised me to be. You are life, you are

love - therefore I will give up myself into your hands. You will bear me in my pain, my emptiness, my fear, my despair over myself. You will bring me to the destination."

Victory through the blood of the lamb

In the desert God teaches me to fight the true battle against the enemy. He teaches me to overcome the devil by the only strategy which leads to the goal. This is first the blood of the lamb. Here I must do nothing. Jesus has shed his blood. If the devil says to me in the desert, "Just see how your heart looks, how broken, guilty and impossible you are. You don't have a chance..." then I can say, "It's true, I'm guilty, I'm weak. (It's best to confront the devil with truth, which he can't stand.) But the blood of the lamb cleanses me. And there's nothing in this creation which can resist the blood of Jesus. There's nothing in my heart which can't be cleansed by the blood of the lamb. No guilt is so great – neither in my life nor among other people's - that it can't be forgiven through the blood of God's lamb."

This silences the enemy. If I really believe that the blood of the lamb is stronger than every embedded characteristic in my life, than every ethnic characteristic, than every tradition and every other power, then I need not fear the enemy's accusations. In the wilderness of our lives the meaning of the lamb's blood becomes truly precious. It is the sole means by which we can stand up to the enemy.

The word of testimony

The second part of the strategy for overcoming is the word of testimony. What testimony is meant here? It is the testimony that Jesus overcame everything on the cross. In the desert everything is moving toward the cross. In the wilderness I experience the truth and reality of the cross for my life. God shows me how incurably ill my heart has become through separation from him who is life; how pride, arrogance, lies and greed hold me imprisoned in a hopeless condition; how un-whole, confused and destroyed my life is, so that I can only cry out like Paul, "What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me?" (Rom. 7:24).

But God shows me not only the depth of my need for salvation. He also shows me the liberating message which makes possible hope and my personality's restoration. On the cross Jesus bore not only my guilt, but also the sickness of my humanity, the pains, the isolation and confusion of my soul, the wounds and ingrained grooves of destruction caused by my own history. He took on himself the crushing burden which was on my shoulders, the deadly poison in my heart, the depressing distress in my spirit. He wants me to stand up, breathe, hope, be joyful and live. There is nothing in my life which Jesus cannot liberate and lead into freedom and life. He who knows me to the depths of my soul is wholly for me.

God is love and I was created for him. What a message! When this testimony lives in my heart and I confess it before the visible and the invisible world, the enemy of God, the enemy of life must yield.

Not loving life so much as to shrink from death

The third part of the overcomer strategy is "They did not love their lives so much as to shrink from death" (Rev. 12:11). This refers not only to those who long for martyrdom, but to every person who begins to follow after Jesus. This is not a matter of one last heroic deed when we are thrown into prison somewhere to die; it is the willingness to let go of our lives daily in small parts. Paul said, "For your sake we face death all day long; we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered"(Rom. 8:36). This is a daily dying for Jesus' sake; we let go of our lives in instalments. If I confess Jesus in my life and in this world, I will certainly receive blows to my being. For I live in a world which is hostile to Jesus. Whoever fears for his life is easy prey

for the devil because he can be blackmailed with threats and violence. If I am afraid to lose my life, I am easy to overcome. Only those who have no fear of losing their lives have nothing to fear from the devil.

God wants to teach us how we can overcome the enemy: through the blood of the lamb, through the word of our testimony and by not loving our lives so much as to cringe from death. And all of this begins in the desert. If someone who is reading this finds himself in the desert right now, he can know that nothing better can happen to him because he is in a place where his love for Jesus will gain authenticity, substance and truth. In the desert we draw closer to Jesus and experience who he really is.

It is essential that we do not rebel in the desert, but watch and pray so that we can hear the difference between Jesus' voice and the voice of the enemy. This protects us from falling into a victim mentality. The enemy always sides with our self-pity. He always confirms our rebellion. He always endorses our distaste for suffering and declares, "Yes, of course, this shouldn't happen to you; it's asking too much that God put you into such a situation. This is impossible. It contradicts God's love. Do something to end this situation as quickly as possible." The devil's voice is always very much on the side of our problems! But God's voice asks, "Do you love me - even in this situation? Are you standing with me? Are you really willing to persevere with me if you receive no answer now? Are you willing to be completely open? May I give you a heart of flesh, which is a vulnerable heart?"

Jesus' words, "I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full" (John 10:10) always stand as a banner above God's work in us. Yes, we can experience the fullness of life in the desert, for it is written, "Angels came and attended him" (Matt. 4:11). Every one of us can experience that. If our hearts have grasped Jesus' love, if we have given him our "Yes" and have continued with him, we will experience an increasingly full life. Then angels will really serve us in his name

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