

Sin and the Desert
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The wilderness is a desert – a vast arid scrubland, like the Marin Headlands, only larger – a place where wolves scavenge, and mountain lions hunt.

Warm-blooded animals are prone to die in the wilderness, and Vultures circle overhead. Vultures and death, the wilderness is a deplete and replete landscape, depleted of regeneration, and replete with degeneration.

The ancients thought demons live in the wilderness – lurking, skulking, hiding behind rock and under stone, in dank caves or beneath cliff ledges.

Demons, yet for some unknown reason, the Spirit of God leads Jesus into wilderness to combat demons like gladiators led into the coliseum.

For forty days and nights of wandering – symbolizes the time the Hebrews wandered in the wilderness after escaping slavery in Egypt - forty years in a similar desolate and demon-laden place –

Jesus starves himself, here, and seems almost crazed. Only, polite Christian art depicts Jesus otherwise, with Jesus wearing a clean robe, carrying a staff, his beard and hair combed and washed.

But Jesus would not have been clean, he would have been dirty; he would have looked homeless – His clothes ripped, caught on dead branches, mud-caked from desert deluges;

Jesus' beard would have been tangled, spittle caked-in.

Tangling, wrestling with demonic forces endemic to sand and thistle, brush and rock –

Wrestling with the devil himself, but Jesus is a spiritual great – the greatest, we are to learn – and these fanciful temptations are known as messianic temptations, they are issues you and I do not face.

The devil has never taken me to the top of the cliffs, to offer me the kingdoms of the world in exchange for worship.

The devil has never led me to the Temple parapet and encouraged me to jump, or deluded me into thinking stones were bread.

I am, shall we say, a humble man. My temptations are simple. They aren't even so great as to include cheating, or undercutting someone to get ahead.

Maybe telling a little white lie here, engaging a little deception there. I watch television, too much. I like fatty foods, and, a little salacious gossip.

But those failures sound like that: failures. Mistakes. We all make mistakes, right? But temptations are not about the actions themselves, they are about the compromises we make –

This is the slippery slope of a life compromised.

Compromised lives, compromises on all the little things. The little things that mean we live mediocre lives, that often hurt others. For, you see, the old Kitty Kallen song was right, little things mean a lot.

In our culture, the twin concepts of sin and evil have been neutered. They have been rendered impotent.

People no longer believe evil is a rock-hard concept.

Rather, people behave badly.

People no longer believe that sin exists as a jagged and intrusive concept.

Rather, people make bad choices.

Even the word itself, sin, comes with baggage – the old Catholic meaning you learned as a teenager, it conjures up puerile lust or cheating on your spelling test. Not measuring up to your mom's absurd standards, like she's still, these years later, sitting on your shoulder. Stealing a pack of gum at the dime store.

But this is a childish conception of sin. And we are not children. What, then, does "sin" mean?

First, There is what I call the big "S" Sin – the evil that we cannot escape, or that, as the Apostle Paul says, (to paraphrase) casts a pall as a veil over the earth – so much so that we can only see in part.

Big S sin is the darkness, the evil, a world in which murder and war and deception exist, and no matter how hard we try, with education and goodwill, we cannot escape it. You might call that "original sin" – it is something that is larger than you are, larger than your actions.

And yet, there it is, lurking as a demon in the wilderness, behind rocks and in caves.

Then, there is little "s" sin – the deeds we have done, and those we have left undone.

Little “s” sin – is about you, the corrosive actions you take, or the deleterious failure to take action – what we have done, and what we have left undone.

Little “s” sin are not “bad” because of the actions themselves, they are “bad” because they hurt others, or they have a corrosive effect on your relationships. Or, they strip integrity, act by act, or they affect your relationship with God. Nagging a spouse, snapping at a child, salacious gossip about a neighbor – and certainly some of the more infamous in this category: adultery or cheating or stealing.

These “little-s” sins rust relationships, over time, they erode self-confidence, and affect mutual trust.

Take gossip, for example – a little gossip, a bare whisper about a friend – and you are instantly divided from that friend, and then compound that with weeks, or months of whispering, and there forms a chasm –

Failures multiplied exponentially, and at the end of it all, we face estrangement from others, divorce, and loneliness.

Little-S sin, and ...

Little things that mean a lot, Kitty Kallen was correct, the little choices in life –

Big-S sin is not the same as little-s. The two are perhaps related, but indirectly. Your little sin matters, but it is not going to turn you into Hitler.

I would submit:

Jesus faced Messianic temptations because the Earth – hidden behind the pall of darkness – what I would call evil – needed a Messiah, someone to redeem it.

Also, I would submit that, sadly, there are people who give themselves over to that evil, to that darkness in such palpable ways – such as Qhadaffi – who is willing to strafe protestors to maintain his very dark rule ...

But this is Lent – and my concern right here, right now, is the erosion of your life, the compromise of your faith.

Jesus interpreted his own ability to endure the big temptations: it was because he could endure the little ones. As he said elsewhere: the one who is faithful in the small things will be faithful in the large.

Which is the same as saying what you do at the subatomic level matters, but if you are like me, you have a vague sense of the compromises you have made, the slippery slope on which you find yourself.

Nothing really very wrong, but you have become driftwood, your edges worn by sand and surf and time, aimless in the sea.

Spiritually and morally worn, but Lent offers regeneration. The season to examine yourself, to splay yourself before a kind Creator, and to ask for help bringing yourself back to center.

That simple call is this morning's quest, to return to center. We have that simple hope. We have the promise that return is possible.