

I am not sure how long we had been living in Tucson; it might have been the first summer we were there, when our then-only-dog, Stella (the black one), was on our back patio and barking sharply. We looked, and saw one of these: [slide of tarantula]

While these pictures were taken a few months ago in front of our garage door, to my knowledge it is that we are in the desert that for the first time in our lives we have encountered these oversized bugs. While their bite is apparently not much worse than that of a bumble-bee, they are one of the *perils* of the desert.

In the Greek of the New Testament, which of course includes the Gospel of Mark from which we are reading most Sundays of this church year, the word used for “wilderness” or “desert” is “*eremos*.” (I am showing this in Greek script to provide the snow job we miss by being here in the winter.) In the New Testament, “*eremos*” appears as a noun, an adjective, and a verb form, and the latter helps our understanding of what *desert* originally implied, and also shows why I believe that *wilderness*, the more common term used in connection with Jesus’ forty days with which we in part associate Lent, does not quite capture the full picture this Gospel story presents. The Greek word has the sense of *solitary*, *lonely*, *desolate*, and when used as a verb participle, *deserted* — note the relevance, — *abandoned*.

*Abandoned* may be one condition to contemplate as we enter Lent, to imagine Jesus as *abandoned* amidst the *tarantulas*, alone and . . . wait; the Gospel does not have Jesus completely *abandoned and alone*, for we have this presence who bears the description of *satan*.

As those who have been with me over the past almost six years know, I keep trying to emphasize that *satan* is not necessarily a name as opposed to a description. The word first appears in the Old Testament story of Job, the Hebrew word, *satan*, meaning *tempter*, a meaning that carries into the same word in the Greek of the New Testament. Thus, Jesus is *tempted*, tested, with, according to a source not used by the writer of Mark but rather by the writers of Matthew and Luke, *tempted* by this *tempter* with three specific *temptations*, which I might characterize as *wealth*, *power*, and *praise*. These three strong individual *tempters* many of us have known at one time or another in our lives, and despite the ages of most of us, we might still know one or two of these *tempters*, or perhaps others such as *lust* or *vanity*, *tempters* that when we yield to them can debase us.

And as I think about it, are not these *tempters* every bit as much perils, yet potentially even more destructive *perils*, than the desert’s *tarantulas* around my home that might sting us, might sting us, but not debase our lives?

And you and I encounter these *tempters* not just in the desert, but in the course of our every day lives.

Which has exactly what to do with our Gospel and Lent?

This is a short sermon today, so please forgive this *excursus*. As I was checking the Greek word used in Mark for desert or wilderness, that search led me to *deserted*, *abandoned*, which then led me to hum an aria from Puccini's opera, "Manon Lescaut," in which the heroine, a fallen woman, escaped from France and ending up in the desert of Louisiana — Puccini did not know much about Louisiana — sings in her soprano voice, "*Sola, perduta, abandonata*," "I am alone, lost, and abandoned."

*Alone, lost, and abandoned*. That undoubtedly describes how you and I feel at times as we encounter the *tarantulas* — aging, illness, addictions — and *tempters* — dependencies, weaknesses, behaviors we know we should cease — in our lives; they are our personal parallels to what Jesus encountered as he was tempted and tested by this *satan* fellow when Jesus was *alone, lost, and abandoned* in the *desert*.

Of course, Jesus' being *alone, lost, and abandoned* would not be the same as our being so, still, might I suggest that although the writer of Mark's what-we-would-call "Trinitarian" theology is not explicit, Jesus, this gospel writer tells us, was driven into the desert *by the Spirit*; he does not say that the Spirit abandoned Jesus rather than stayed with him!

Jesus was not *alone, lost, and abandoned*, nor are we as we encounter the *tarantulas* and *tempters* that life puts in our way.

At any rate, Jesus stood up to the *tempters* he encountered — the writer does not mention any *tarantulas*, — and as we encounter the *tarantulas* and *tempters* of life, neither are we alone nor lost nor abandoned, because this same Jesus who stood up to whoever this *satan* was is with us, with us in the form of what you and I identify as that same Spirit that drove Jesus into the desert, the Holy Spirit that we believe Jesus the Son and God the Father have sent— maybe "has sent" is poor grammar but better theology — the Holy Spirit that we believe Jesus the Son and God the Father *has* sent us.

Has sent us, and is available to us when we call upon God, and more readily and easily available to us when we call upon God *in prayer*.

We will not withstand all *tarantula* bites. We will get sick at times, and when the time is right, we will die; yet even our sickness and the prospect of death is less frightening when we know that we are not alone in the desert of life any more than was Jesus alone in the desert those forty days. We probably will not conquer all *tempters* in life, but I can testify, I can bear witness, along with those who have cured addictions through religious based twelve step programs, that prayer can defeat at least some of those *tempters*. Prayer can defeat and conquer at least some, and when in despair we fail, prayer can help us know that a loving God is with us still.

So Lent is perhaps a time to recognize and give thanks that as we venture through the desert that is earthly life and encounter its *tarantulas* and *tempters*, God has been there — been *here* — in the form of the Son, and is here still in the form of the Holy Spirit, so that we are not *alone* nor *lost* nor *abandoned*

and that to know that we are not, we have only to pray. Prayer, a much more meaningful undertaking for Lent than giving up chocolate.

My morning personal meditation this year, as I have mentioned a few weeks ago, is centered on reading some excerpts from one of my heroes, the German minister martyred by the Nazis, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, from whom I am lifting these words:

. . . [P]rayer is the heart of the Christian life. Luther said that as a shoemaker makes shoes and a tailor makes clothes, a Christian must pray. . . Praying is not just bidding, nor is it just giving thanks. Praying means, first of all, being so still that we perceive God's will for us. . . Praying means coming close to God and wanting to remain close, because [God] has come close to us.

Bonhoeffer goes on, but I think you get his point. During Lent let us contemplate that despite the *tarantulas* and *tempters* we encounter in life, we do not encounter them alone. It is a great hymn, but we do not walk that lonesome valley alone. God is with us; let us never abandon prayer and we shall know that we are not *alone, lost, nor abandoned*, "Sola, perduta, abandonata."

Gee, I got opera into the sermon, even if I did not squeeze in Illinois football.

Amen.