

**St Mark's, Niagara-on-the-Lake**  
**The First Sunday in Lent, year 'C'**  
**6 March 2022**  
**The Rev'd Leighton Lee**

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Some of you will have heard of a book called *The Lonely Crowd*. In it the author, David Riesman, speaks of “other-directed people,”—folks who crave constant reassurance that they are acceptable, useful, and desired by other people. In the more than half century since it was published, our society has more and more become almost exclusively one of other-directed people. Scroll through Instagram and you'll see what I mean.

I recently learned a new term: thirst trap. Technically speaking, a thirst-trap is a kind of selfie taken (and posted) online with the intent of arousing sexual desire. Social media abounds in these sorts of pictures, but isn't the whole thing really a thirst-trap, a massive venture at arousing desire in us—be it for people, or food, or travel, or ... whatever? Social media has conditioned us to crave reassurance that we're desirable. But such reassurance has been very difficult in these times of pandemic.

There's no doubt we've been through an arid time. We're parched and thirsty for companionship and connection. Yet here we are on the First Sunday in Lent listening to an account of Jesus' temptation in the wilderness. It seems almost perverse given the fact that every one of us is sick of being in the wilderness of isolation and deprivation. But I think there's a lesson in this story for you and me.

The gospels are quite clear that Jesus surrounded himself with friends and a cohort of loyal disciples—and that he was surrounded by people who wished to draw near to him and experience something of his charismatic power at close range. But they're also quite clear that Jesus didn't need the validation of others. His ministry began with a long period alone in a wilderness and it ended with an isolated vigil in a garden forsaken by even his closest companions. Between these two events, we read of how he often withdrew to quiet places by himself. And who could blame him since he was constantly surrounded by people? So with that in mind, the question I have for us this morning is what is the value of alone time?

There's no doubt that we're made for companionship, love, community. When we're denied social contact, we become distorted, wizened, and shrunken. We are who we are because of our relationships and interactions with others. But we also need alone time to learn life's lessons through the reflective times that silence provides.

Over the past two years we've had more opportunities for alone time and for me, and maybe for you, the Lenten wilderness experience became a lived reality. But perhaps it was a helpful antidote because in a real way, ours had become a soul-sick society that has been made even sicker by continually indulging in busyness, frantic activity,

continuous social engagements, pathological addiction to constant communication and intrusions of every sort. Enforced isolation revealed the loose ends of this frantic way of life. But it also gave us a perspective on how we were hiding behind our busyness and too preoccupied with things to even be aware of what was happening to us. You wonder how our ancestors coped. Back when Addison came here as a missionary, it must have been pretty lonely with very few neighbours, and with very little to fill the long and dark evening hours. For much of their lives they would have been alone—or at least alone from our point of view.

Which brings me back to thirst-traps. When you think about it, isn't it ironic that the more we've become interested with self-help and therapy and yoga and drumming groups and whatever else, the less we're able to be alone for even a nanosecond? So often it seems that all of our self-awareness is about an inch deep and a mile wide, especially since it feels so good to get attention and right to be in the company of others, surrounded by noise and clamber and activity. We tend to think that people who spend Friday night at home alone with a book and some soft jazz playing are a little odd. We tend to think that people who live off the grid in a kind of contemporary re-enactment of Henry David Thoreau's Walden Pond are a little odd. We tend to think that people who make the conscious choice to live at home with the companionship of nothing but a couple of cats are a little odd.

Of course we think those are odd choices because we think being alone is synonymous with being lonely. But to find ourselves alone from time to time, or even to deliberately set aside some time or some place in which we can be alone, isn't a sign of neurotic weakness. Rather it's a sign of psychological and spiritual health.

This is why the story of Jesus in the wilderness is so a propos. Because only when we are still, silent, and alone can we begin to grasp the awesome mystery of our baptism: that at our core, we are not what we do, or what we own, or what others say about us, we are the beloved of God.

Jesus' time in the wilderness came after his baptism, that time described when the heavens opened, a dove descended and the voice of God said, "This is my beloved son in whom I am well pleased." And that is what baptism says of each of us, that we are beloved by God, indeed we are God's dearly loved daughters and sons.

Like Jesus, we're tempted to imagine ourselves as people who are defined by what we do: "Turn these stones into bread." Or by what others say about us: "Throw yourself off the temple." Or by what we have: "You can have the kingdoms of the world." But in the end none of that matters, because all that *does* matter is that we're children of God. Each of us is desired by God not for the image we project or the number of likes we can command, but simply for who are.

But this divine truth can begin to seep into our consciousness only when we're alone and able to clear some space in our hearts and minds and say, as the Psalmist says, "You are my refuge and my stronghold, my God in whom I put my trust." So this Lent,

let's dare to be still—and even alone—that we may find time to open our hearts to the one who calls us this and every day into becoming who we most deeply are: God's beloved one.