

## Trusting God in the desert



This photo is from last week's Sunday school class. Eveline had sunglasses AND hats for us all to put on, because we were going to the desert. The desert is a dry sunny place. In the middle of a Dutch winter day we tried to imagine the heat, the thirst, the hunger.

Jesus has just been baptised and will be heading into the desert.

Matthew 3:17 and 4: 1-4 <sup>17</sup> And along with the Spirit, a voice: "This is my Son, chosen and marked by my love, delight of my life." Next Jesus was taken into the wild by the Spirit for the Test. The Devil was ready to give it. Jesus prepared for the Test by fasting forty days and forty nights. That left him, of course, in a state of extreme hunger, which the Devil took advantage of in the first test: "Since you are God's Son, speak the word that will turn these stones into loaves of bread." Jesus answered by quoting Deuteronomy: "It takes more than bread to stay alive. It takes a steady stream of words from God's mouth." the message

After 40 days of fasting, Jesus must have felt so tired. What would it feel like to face a big bully just when you've discovered that you've got nothing in your pockets? What was it like for Jesus to face this challenge? 'You've got the power, Jesus. I mean, you're God's son, right?'

in essence, it was a wrestling match:

on the one hand, Jesus knows he is God's son;

on the other, he realizes that he is in great need.

So, what is really happening in the desert? God's son in great need.

### >>the 'first hand': Jesus' identity as God's son.

Jesus goes into the desert right after his baptism, knowing he is not just son of God but beloved son. What is the difference? A son has an identity and a position; he has authority and rights. A son is full of potential, because of his relationship with his father. But now consider what it means to be a dearly loved son. This says something about how the father feels about you and how you experience the relationship. It is another dimension.

We see this in family life all the time. For example, Otis, in our coffee-team, had an important experience of sonship in his life. I share this with his permission. As a young man, he experienced many problems. At a given moment, his future wife Stefanie helped him see that he needed to have a relationship with God; then he could get the help he needed to solve these problems. Otis found that he was able to trust God as his father because he had felt loved by his stepfather, who had adopted him. For Otis, this adoption meant that he was accepted from the heart. This was in contrast with his

half-brother, who was not adopted like Otis was. It has taken his brother a long time to learn to trust in the love of his heavenly Father. But God is good, and his family has kept praying for him— and this brother has become a person who loves and can experience love ('hij kan liefhebben en wordt geliefd').

**>> the “other hand”: Jesus, beloved son, is led to go into the desert, a place of vulnerability.**

Even if you know you're loved, you still experience all kinds of need. We are constantly bombarded with “needing MORE”... More of this or that thing or that experience or feeling. If we don't get some relief, this may lead to anxiety, anger and exhaustion. And these emotions can start running the show. When Jesus went into the desert he was identifying himself completely with us. He allowed himself to face the neediness each of us faces. This makes the challenge in the desert so relevant: we see that it is possible to be vulnerable or needy and at the same time to be dearly loved. Jesus chose in great humility to share our hunger, thirst and weariness. He also chose to share our longing for meaning, love and acceptance.

Hebrews 4:16 We don't have a priest who is out of touch with our reality. He's been through weakness and testing, experienced it all—all but the sin. So let's walk right up to him and get what he is so ready to give. Take the mercy, accept the help. The *Message* translation

In other words, Jesus perfectly shared our humanity-- and being perfectly God, he can offer us real help. He knows our reality, has experienced it all, without disconnecting from God. What is there for us to do? Take the mercy, accept the help.

the text today shows us **two ways** that Jesus helps us. The first way is through his example. But also what he says teaches us something about his Father—and helps us trust him.

### **He helps us by his example**

When Jesus is baptised, the Father publicly announces that he is His beloved son. Jesus is equipped with this identity. He then goes out alone into the desert to be hungry, thirsty, dirty and sunburned. He's cold at night, and overheated during the day. That is some inauguration. Compare that with the inauguration of King Willem Alexander and queen Maxima on their day—celebrations, cruises, music and feasting!

There are times we experience our life as a desert, where we face things that reveal our vulnerability. If we believe that God doesn't know or care about our struggles, we might close our hearts. We might allow negative emotions to run the show. We feel alone, isolated from God and each other. The enemy comes in like one of those predators in nature documentaries. It is always the isolated animal that gets picked off. (Shudder)

When you feel isolated it is easy to go into survival-mode. Like your computer, have you ever had to start it up in 'safe-mode'? You can't do anything!

Jesus breaks the downward spiral of isolation. One of the first things we see him doing in the Bible is experiencing our reality. But, where we couldn't trust God, Jesus does not allow himself to be isolated from his Father. The enemy says, 'hey, Jesus-the-son, you've got the authority as son to do whatever you want'. And this is true because Jesus has the authority. But this is not the full truth, because Jesus has much more: he is also dearly loved son. And because Jesus keeps trusting in the Father's love for him, he can see the twist—the half-truth-- in the enemy's suggestion.. Sure, a son acts with authority to overcome any obstacle, but a dearly loved son stays close to his father's heart to accomplish these things. Jesus, knowing his beloved identity, resists the temptation to meet his needs outside of his Father. He can only do this because he trusts that the father will meet his needs. That the father will provide. What do we learn? That we can face tough situations in the desert by living as dearly loved children. That's the example Jesus gave here (and in many other moments).

But we can also learn from the way he answers the enemy's half-truth.

### **He helps us by what he teaches us**

Jesus says, "Man shall live by the steady stream of the words from God's mouth."

There are two lesser-known Greek words in Jesus' answer to this first test. First, there are two words used in the New Testament for WORD. They are logos and rhema. Logos is the more commonly used word for 'word'. It has to do with the word that is expressed. Jesus is our logos, the true expression of God. But the word that Jesus used here for words is not logos but rhema. Rhema is a very personal communication by someone to another. So when you're reading the Bible (the written expression, logos), for example, and you feel God whispering to your heart, 'that part, right there...that's for you...'; that's Rhema. It's God's personal message. So, what does it mean when you 'get a revelation'? God is speaking to reveal himself. Your revelation is when your heart has finally 'received' his message. Jesus says that God's word is pouring out like a river. That word translated as river is the second Greek word we have talked about today. Many translations just say 'every word that comes from God'. The NIV uses 'proceeds'. But the word is not just talking about the 'source' of the word; the word is giving us the image of a river. God's communications to us are like a river flowing 24/7. What is our reality? We need bread. Specifically, just like the Israelites in their desert, we need a constant stream of bread. Jesus is referring to the manna they picked up each day. In the Bible this has always been an image of trusting God spiritually. Jesus has come so that we have a choice. We can choose to survive on the bread we can scavenge every day OR we can thrive by trusting in God's constant and personal river of love.

And this river for us and for the whole world. This word is not used often, but it also appears in the book of Revelations as the RIVER of life.

Then the Angel showed me Water-of-Life River, crystal bright. It flowed from the Throne of God and the Lamb, right down the middle of the street. The Tree of Life was planted on each side of the River, producing twelve kinds of fruit, a ripe fruit each month. The leaves of the Tree are for healing the nations. Revelations 22:1-5 The message

This passage, while about the future, speaks to me about God's heart NOW. He sees our pain, sees that we don't understand how beloved we are. He sent his son to show us the way of life and to give us life. In Christ, he will heal the nations.

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### **What to do with this word?**

Preparing today's message has shown me how practical the word 'beloved' is. Hans has been preaching in the letter of John. In this short letter John addresses us as 'beloved' 6 times. I always thought that John is being sentimental -- and this was just his style. But Paul, Peter and James also talk to us as 'dearly loved'. I now think that New Testament writers call us 'beloved' because our 'dearly loved by God' identity is foundational: it's a place to build on. Some examples: As dearly beloved people, love one another. Dearly loved ones, be strong. As dearly loved ones, let us work together. Dearly loved ones, obey God. Dearly loved ones, don't be mis-led. Dearly loved ones, don't be surprised at the trials you are going through. Dearly loved ones, build each other up.

**House-groups:** Can you see how Jesus' example shows us that our identity as beloved sons and daughters is 'a place to build on'?

Not just Jesus is beloved son. He has come to show us that we too are dearly loved by God. I'm safe in his love, safe in Jesus, who really knows me. I can be real, relax with him. I never have to feel isolated. Nothing, not even my mistakes, can separate me from his love in Jesus. This is who we are in Christ.

This love is something we also *experience*, just as Otis experienced the emotional love of his stepfather. God feels strong emotions about us. In the story Jesus told about the prodigal son, he describes how the father felt about the return of the prodigal son: "this is my son who's back! I had to rejoice!"

What about the resources Jesus mentioned in the text we read today? Have you noticed his rhema communications to you? I find that the flow of his words to me is very personal indeed. My challenge

is to tune in, and to value what he speaks to me. I love words and puzzles, and I find that he gives me word puzzles to solve with Him! This leads me to do good things like meditating on these words with him, and getting into the Bible. Janneke writes down the words God speaks to her in a what's-app to herself, so she can keep on being nourished by them. Marina, Wilma and Petra paint inspired paintings. God speaks to Lans through the speeches of Martin Luther King. Zoe hears from God as she walks her dog in the forest. Perhaps you are a visual-type of person-- and, the next time you put on sunglasses, you will think about how beloved you are.

**House-groups:** think about the ways that God speaks his word to you. How do you let his word dwell in you, so that you are nourished by Him?

Prayer:: Lord, thank you for Jesus. You have showed us your great love in your Son. Please transform us with your love. Help us to be people who love and can be loved. Equip us to be part of your plan to heal nations. Open our eyes to see where you are leading us. amen