

Sermon Lent I Year B 2018

Genesis 9:8-17

Psalm 25:1-9

1 Peter 3:18-22

Mark 1:9-15

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There can be no question that Lent has begun. We marked the transition to this season of reflection and repentance appropriately last week. First on Shrove Tuesday evening, we held a joyful Mardi Gras party for people of all ages. Beads, decorations, delicious food and beverages, fellowship, music, and of course a parade made the evening special. Then we shifted our focus to Lent at three services on Ash Wednesday. There we were marked with ashes in the sign of the cross on our foreheads reminding us of our mortality. The sign of the cross is made with these words, “remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return.”

Wednesday was a poignant day with the rare juxtaposing of Ash Wednesday and Valentine’s Day. (This particular confluence happened last in 1945, at least some of us were around and may recall the event). But then late in the afternoon (on Wednesday), February 14, 2018 was forever indelibly recorded as tragedy struck with yet another mass shooting at a school, this time a high school in Parkland, Fl and 17 innocent lives were lost (14 students, 1 teacher and 2 coaches). Gun violence is our communal inheritance as a consequence of our inadequate understanding of freedom.

The week has been a somber one. And if you weren’t sure that Lent changes everything, the Great Litany that began our service was another strong clue. The Litany always sets me back as it reminds me why a season of repentance is certainly warranted. As I listen to the petitions, I realize how many of them hit the nail on the head in my life. As much as I wish I could skip Lent (some years anyway), the Litany reminds me that no, I definitely need a season of reflection and repentance.

This year, our gospel lessons are drawn from Mark’s gospel. One quality of Mark’s gospel is a lot happens in a short span of time. In today’s lesson, Jesus

emerged from the waters of baptism and a voice was heard from heaven. “You are my Son, the Beloved, with you I am well pleased.”

Next, the Spirit drove Jesus into the wilderness. This was a step of formation directed by God in the Spirit. Jesus was sent into the wilderness to experience human existence fully, especially something of our lives which are filled with so much temptation. I imagine that the wilderness experience was formative for Jesus as he came to understand from our perspective just how engaging and irresistible temptation can be. We express this in the Lenten Eucharistic preface where we say, “Through Jesus Christ our Lord, who was tempted in every way as we are, yet did not sin.” (BCP, p. 379). Jesus knows everything that we are going through, because as the Farmer’s Insurance ads might express it, Jesus knows a thing or two because he has seen a thing or two.

To hear the story, the wilderness would seem to be a clearly defined geographic area. Yet, I am surprised that I have not seen the wilderness labeled on any maps of the holy land that I have seen over time. The wilderness then is a symbolic location filled with meaning and significance. The wilderness is where the people of God wandered for 40 years after their escape from exile in Egypt. The wilderness is where we are not in control and where nothing is familiar, nothing bends to our desire or will. It is a place of risk, anxiety, and uncertainty. If the truth be known, we don’t really want any part of the wilderness experience. When we find ourselves in any of the wilderness places in our lives we long to escape as soon as we possibly can. (What might those experiences look like? Perhaps for introverts they include social situations, for extroverts, time alone, or for others perhaps sitting in the doctor’s office waiting room, or despairing while watching the news, or in the midst of a recurring argument with a friend or loved one, or when approaching school and the inevitable bully that awaits us, or feeling abandoned and not knowing who we might call for support, or any time when we come face to face with our own sin and our inability to address it, or when we inevitably relapse while recovering from a host of addictive realities.). With a little honest reflection, we can probably identify those wilderness places in our lives, the places where temptation holds immense power over us and despair is close at hand.

This season of Lent offers us 40 days to focus our attention. To focus our attention and reflect on those desert experiences and upon on our relationship with God.

Traditionally, Christians have approached Lent through the lens of activities that we sometimes refer to as spiritual disciplines. By spiritual we include a broad spectrum of possibilities that may draw us closer or strengthen our dependence on God. Disciplines might include fasting, prayer, devotion, acts of piety, and meditation for example, but so much more as well.

These disciplines may involve taking on certain behaviors or activities. Or they may involve our abstaining from certain activities or behaviors during this season of Lent. And the possibilities for either approach are seemingly endless.

Giving Up:

Let's turn our attention first to the disciplines that involve limiting or controlling or abstaining from activities or items. This week you may have heard people asking the question, "What are you giving up for Lent?" The possible activities all have something to do with denying ourselves. Actions and activities that might offer us instead points of connection between us and God. So that when we are tempted, we instead draw on God for support. The theory of this category of spiritual practice is that we call upon God to strengthen us to resist the temptation of the item that we are denying ourselves. This allows us to draw closer to God as we call upon God's strength in resisting whatever we have given up. Lent then can be a season to do without something or to restrict something. To scale back. You've heard of folks saying no to dessert, or no chips, no alcohol, no candy, no chocolate, you get the picture. These tended to be my earlier pursuits during Lent.

This Lent, some creative folks have devised ways to make a discipline something that would have a double benefit. Giving up something that will help us and help the environment perhaps. Like Bishop Marianne Budde's initiative in the Diocese of Washington this Lent, "give up using plastic for Lent." Now they are not talking about credit cards. Though that might also be a possibility in your life. You can read about it on the Diocese of Washington's website and Facebook page.

The possibilities for Lenten activities can run the gamut. If you have been worshipping the god of convenience you might try to break the convenience habit.

Perhaps by resolving to sit down and eat dinner together as a family each evening. Or rather in place of that fast food, frozen dinners, or take out, instead cooking your own dinner. Or avoiding the drive through window at fast food restaurants.

You might resolve to limit your and perhaps your family's screen time in some way. Or give up video games, spider solitaire or Sudoku, etc. You get the idea.

Taking On: Another approach to Lent involves taking something new on for Lent. Disciplines like Bible study, prayer, fasting, meatless Mondays, saying grace before meals, performing some act of kindness each day. Or you might choose to read a spiritual reflection each day such as *Forward Day by Day*. Or you might use the reflection book that Kim and I obtained for you, "Living Well through Lent 2018", copies of which are available in the Fauber Gallery.

Prayer is one possibility and can take many forms. We might try each evening reflecting upon the things that we are grateful for on this day. We may offer prayers at specific times, such as first thing on arising or as we go to sleep. We may offer grace before the family meal. We might join a prayer group, such as participating in the Praying in Color sessions, Friday mornings at 11 am on the 4th Floor Day Room in Drinkard at Westminster Canterbury. Or we might try to be more regular at Sunday or midweek worship.

We might choose to take on a new activity. We could volunteer or visit or pray with or for others.

The hope of these Lenten disciplines is that they cause us to stop, pause and reflect in some way upon our relationship and dependence on God. To further develop our connection with the divine love which is always seeking to draw us closer.

When Jesus came up out of the waters of Baptism, he heard the heavenly voice speak God's love and approval. The same voice calls to us from the waters of Baptism, though with such a cacophony of demands surrounding us, it can be very difficult for us to hear the still small voice of God. Perhaps your Lenten season in the wilderness may strengthen and develop your relationship with God who loves you dearly. You may just come to know that you too are just as loved as Jesus. As the season of Lent progresses, may we come to hear or appreciate God say to us, "You are my beloved, with you I am well pleased."