

First Sunday in Lent
Genesis 2:15-17; 3:1-7
Romans 5:12-19
Matthew 4:1-11
Psalm 32

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St. Peter's Glenside

May the words of my mouth and the mediations of my heart be acceptable to thee O Lord, my strength and my redeemer. AMEN

Turns out, the Holy Spirit, in the form of a gentle dove, which descended from heaven at Jesus' baptism in the river Jordan, had some talons. Because immediately after being baptized, Jesus didn't go to brunch, he was led *by the Holy Spirit*, into the wilderness, the desert and left there.

For forty days and forty nights Jesus was tormented and tempted by Satan. While we don't get the specifics, we know enough to know none of us want to be there, although in truth, we already have.

Who among us hasn't been tested, demoralized, depressed, defeated, left alone to reckon with our demons no matter what they may be; mental illness, addiction, catastrophic loss and grief? It's part of the landscape of being alive, and how we hate to reconcile ourselves to that reality.

Today is the first Sunday in Lent which cuts right to the chase on Ash Wednesday with this admonition "From dust we come and to dust we shall return." That then begs the question "...and what are you going to do about it?"

The only way that can be answered, is by understanding who you are and who God is. Which is what Jesus, as always, teaches us.

Why would God hurl his beloved son into the desolate wilderness with wild beasts and Satan? It feels hard to square with a loving father.

But the wilderness is where Jesus' identity was formed, defined, and tested. It's clear it was an ordeal. "He fasted for forty days and forty nights, and he was famished" Matthew writes. Jesus emptied himself to be filled, which is

what Lent is all about. The paring down, the turning inward, burning away the dross of all that claims us and distracts us and blinds us from seeing what God sees in us. Satan is not a cartoon character with a pitch fork, he is anything that diverts us from being known and claimed by God.

“You are my beloved in whom I am well pleased,” are the words God speaks at Jesus’ baptism.

Who, then, is this 30 year-old man who’s now launched into the first three years of his ministry and the last three years of his life? Jesus needs to find out and find out fast with just over 1,000 days to fulfill his destiny. So he’s sent to the wilderness. This *does* not mean that God sends us trials and tragedy as teachable moments. It does mean however that transformation happens in the wilderness.

Episcopal priest and author Barbara Brown Taylor, writes in her book *Bread of Angels* that:

This is the story in which everyone finds out what being the son of God really means. This is the story in which Jesus proves who he is *not* by seizing power, but by turning it down. God’s Beloved will not practice magic. He will not ask for special protection or seek political power. As much as it may surprise everyone, including him, he will remain human accepting all the usual risks...A son of God is not someone who is related to God by rising out of his humanity, but someone who is beloved by God for sinking into it, even when he is famished and taunted by the devil himself. It is someone who can listen to every good reason in the world for becoming God’s rival and remain God’s child instead.

We are baptized, too, but then, like Jesus, it is up to understand who God has named and claimed us to be. “Identity. It’s always God’s first move,” writes Lutheran pastor, Nadia Bolz-Weber, “But almost immediately, other things try to tell us who we are and to whom we belong: capitalism, the weight-loss industrial complex, our parents, kids at school — they all have a go at telling us who we are. But only God can do that. Everything else is temptation.”

Temptation. What is that takes you away from who God claims you to be? A question worth asking in these next forty days of Lent. But the answer can only be found in listening, listening for the whisper of God which requires

space and time apart. Carving out that time in prayer and meditation in the silent early morning hours or those late at night are often good places to start.

You quickly find that silence isn't silent. There are all the old and familiar temptations that will tell you that you aren't this enough or that enough. The tyranny of the shoulds will tempt you to be doing something else. It is very hard to continue to listen to, and for, God. But it is hard to think of anything else more worthwhile during these next forty days. Avoid the silliness of giving up something for Lent that means nothing at all; a reboot of failed New Year's resolutions with a Lenten sheen. (One year I actually thought of giving up exclamation marks in emails and texts but my better angels got hold of me.)

Die to something in yourself that's holding you back. "From dust you come and to dust you shall return."

The paradox of the desert wilderness is that while it feels like a place of abandonment, it's ultimately a place of discovery. It's been said that "Suffering is the anvil that hammers out the soul." Reflecting on your own life, when did the wisdom come that made you grow?

The God I wasn't looking for found me during one of the worst years of my life through the words of an Episcopal priest who blessed me at the communion rail with words that penetrated my soul. My desolation was pierced by God's light and there was no turning back because slowly, and haltingly, I kept turning to God. Life remained hard for quite a while but I knew I was not alone. My soul turned to God and I was on a long but steady path to resurrection.

During the ordination process I needed to provide the date of my baptism. My mother couldn't remember so I called the Methodist church where I was baptized. The files were somewhere in the basement but the kind woman who answered the phone volunteered to try and find them.

A month or so later, she called me and said that I was baptized on Easter Sunday, 1951. Then I understood my identity in God was tied to the resurrection. The one power I know I can trust.

Some say every priest has only one sermon. Mine is "After every Good Friday – or wilderness experience—comes Easter."

My Lenten pilgrimage this year is an actual one that will begin with Emily and Pat Sampson on a direct flight from Newark airport to Tel Aviv on March 12th.

Barring further disaster with the coronavirus, we'll be traveling with Bishop Gutierrez and 20 other pilgrims to Israel.

In two and a half weeks, we'll be standing in the desert where Jesus stood. Imagine that.

For me, it is a journey to a place *beyond* imagining, which is where I believe God calls us all.

Lent is an opportunity to discover who you are as God's beloved. Listen. Listen and listen some more.

AMEN