

Sermon for the First Sunday of Lent  
February 21, 2021  
St. Michael's Episcopal Church  
The Reverend Canon Michael J. Horvath  
Gospel: Mark 1: 9-15

Today is the First Sunday in Lent. On Ash Wednesday many of us started our Lenten disciplines or at least started thinking about what they might be. For many people, the question usually asked is "What will I give up for Lent", the idea that these disciplines put us in a state of wandering in the wilderness, at the mercy of Satan, trying to "do" good in the face of temptations that take us in the opposite direction. Mortification of the body has somehow become the Lenten discipline par excellence. I'm no exception. Here's my list of Lenten disciplines over the years – no chocolate, no coffee, no naps, no dairy, no meat, and no sugar. For many years, Lent became a "do-over" of my New Year's Resolutions, a second shot at becoming a new and improved me and if I can hang in there for 40 days, then those temptations will simply revert to things I enjoy.

To be honest, the last twelve months have seemed like Lent, and as I think of yet another thing to deprive myself of, I get the feeling that this isn't really what God is calling me to do at this time and in this place. It's not that I had to find a new way to mortify the flesh, but I'm being called to something different. This year, I am fully reminded that it's not in the doing and doing well of Lenten disciplines that makes them effective, but the failing in them. We don't create our own version of being in the wilderness to win. Hang on and I'll try to explain that a bit more.

As Mark tells it, "Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee" to the Jordan River. He left his home and now stands with John in the Jordan, the border between home and the wilderness. There he is baptized. The heavens are torn apart, the Spirit like a dove descends, and a voice declares, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." From there "the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness." Baptism may happen in the river but the baptismal life begins in the wilderness.

Whether our Lenten disciplines help us imagine this or not, we have all be in the wilderness. It's that in-between space where we just can't seem to think clearly. It can be a place of death that gives new birth. It may be the face in the mirror that reflects to us a life mired by regrets, grudges and vendettas. It may be the land of "Just Beyond Your Reach", where if we only had this kind of relationship, or this amount of money, or this level of respect, life would be grand. The True Wilderness, mostly, forces us to take a long hard look at the reality of our lives; things done and left undone, our fears, our hopes and dreams, our sorrows and losses, as well as the unknown.

In this Wilderness, Jesus is tempted by Satan. This is noted in a very cursory way in Mark's gospel "He...was tempted by Satan." It's up to us to fill in what those temptations might be, from our own lives and experiences. Whatever the temptations might have been for Mark, the

outcome is still the same. Each time, Jesus chooses to lean into who and what he was, the Beloved of God. Each time, Jesus's refusal to succumb to the temptation was a mark of turning towards the life-giving love of God. The added bonus was being waited on by angels.

Now, that's all well and good for Jesus. I mean, we wouldn't really be here if he couldn't handle a few temptations from Satan himself – from pride, to promises of worldly glory. What about us? I mean, denying myself a Cadbury chocolate bar doesn't feel to be on par with what Jesus is trying model for us. And the inadequacy is only highlighted by the fact that I usually succumb to said Cadbury bars pretty easily. How did Jesus's experience in the wilderness end up being simply and overactive sweet tooth in my Lenten journey?

I think we need to go back to what I said earlier. Jesus didn't go to the Wilderness because he already had the divine tools necessary to win over Satan and not be tempted. That wasn't the point. Jesus went to the Wilderness because the human side of him was still very much moved by temptation. Yet, his response to each temptation was to turn towards God. Remember what Jesus does after he leaves the wilderness. He goes around preaching and telling people to repent and believe in the Gospel, the Good News! And what does it mean to repent? Simply to turn around, to turn around towards God when something in this world would make us otherwise put God in second place, in our minds and in our hearts.

Lenten disciplines, whether they be something as seemingly superficial as denying oneself chocolate, or doing something amazing for the greater good of our community, should have one and the same goal – drawing us closer to God! And I think that every time we succumb to temptation, God feels closer to us. Why, because if we white knuckle our way through these wildernesses on our own steam, we can fall into the trap of self-reliance, self-achievement and we become answerable to our ego. "I did it on my own strength, look at me!". So the motivation can get skewed out of whack. Whereas, every time we fail, we get the opportunity to turn towards God and understand that the grace of mercy, the gift of forgiveness, and the promise of eternal life is already ours to be thankful for. In those moments, God can pick us up, dust us off and walk alongside us again.

We are supposed to fail in Lent. The 40 days fast was done by Jesus. He made it through the temptations and travails nearly starving to death. But we are made of lesser stuff. We are weaker and we will fail. Although we are made in the likeness of God and are wonderfully made, we sin and break down. We lose heart. We fall. We eat what we told ourselves we would give up. We lose our patience. And that's ok. We are supposed to fail in Lent, because in our failure we can turn around and meet God again, face to face. What could be better than that?

While creating a wilderness for ourselves during Lent that allows us to turn towards God is a worthy spiritual discipline, the net effect of what we do during Lent is supposed to live on beyond these 40 days. When I said that the last 12 months have felt like a perpetual Lent, it doesn't mean that that the absence of the pandemic would have made life any easier. We are thrown into wildernesses every day of our lives. The scenery may change, but the temptations to move away from God are the same. Yet, each time God simply waits for us to turn towards

him. No questions asked, no explanations needed. The gift of God's grace can only ever be responded to with gratitude of heart. And that gratitude of heart will ensure that we are never lost in our wilderness for very long. Amen.