

The First Sunday in Lent + February 18, 2018

Forty days is a long time to be in the wilderness, especially if you are alone facing wild beasts, and contending with Satan, no less. It is scary, frightening and dangerous. Forty days is a long time for Jesus to be in the wilderness.

The wilderness time takes place after his baptism and before he begins his public ministry. At his baptism, Jesus was declared God's beloved one and anointed with the Spirit. This is his identity. This is who Jesus is. And during his 40 days in the wilderness, Jesus is tempted by Satan to abandon his identity, to forget who he is.

Forty days is a long time in the wilderness, and it's a tough place to remember who you are. The wilderness feels so dangerous and threatening. You can get lost in the wilderness. You can lose your bearings and get disoriented.

I have a friend who, as a young man, began a long-awaited trip overseas. It promised to be quite an adventure. He planned to be gone several weeks, but it wasn't long into his first week away that he began to feel displaced. He had to come home. He found it impossible to embrace any identity so far away from home. He had to escape.

Ever felt that way? Much of the time, we can feel that way without travelling far. Our day-to-day lives often feel like the wilderness when we experience the weight of loneliness, when we feel abandoned, hopeless, or sense a lack of direction. When we are so displaced, it is tough to rest secure in our identity. At times, it may just be impossible to "remember who you are."

So, here we are. We have begun our 40 day journey of Lent and it is a time for you to *remember who you are*. Lent isn't meant to take you to into a wilderness, but it is an opportunity to get in touch with those parts of your life that feel like a wilderness. These are important discoveries to make, and they yield to the even greater discovery that in Jesus we find our rest.

More to the point: not unlike Jesus' 40 days, the 40 days of Lent is a time to face down the tempter.

A time spent in discernment to discover what it is that tempts us to abandon our identity. What tempts us to forget that we are loved by God and set apart to be followers of Jesus?

Mark's Gospel is pretty sparse in describing the temptation story, but Matthew and Luke go into greater detail. In their narratives, Jesus is tempted with the allure of having power, being glamorous and spectacular, proving himself, and getting sucked in by greed. Jesus resists, not out of willpower or might, but by resting in God, relying on the Spirit,

and by remembering his essential identity declared by God at his baptism: “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”

We enter into this Lenten journey to remember again who we are – part of God’s beloved community, bearing God’s Spirit and forever loved by God.

I think that in order to embrace a greater sense of our identity, we must do the work of naming what tempts us – that is, naming those powers that seek to pull us away from our God given identity.

Lent is a time to get honest about these things.

At the Easter Vigil we heartily renounce the powers that defy God, the systems that rebel against God, and the ways of sin that draw us from God. In order to prepare for that dramatic moment, let’s take the time between now and then to practice what we preach and to renounce in body, mind, and spirit what we renounce in word and gesture on Easter Eve.

Such a task requires discernment. That means we pay attention to the reality of the powers we renounce. I don’t think it takes a ton of discernment to notice the powers that defy God and the forces that rebel against God. All we have to do is read the news. The shooting that took place at the school in Parkland, Florida on Ash Wednesday is a pretty obvious example.

How do we respond to an event like this? How do we resist the evil God abhors and the things that make God weep?

It seems that these mass shootings like the one last week have become commonplace and routine, and it seems a pattern has developed in the aftermath of these senseless acts of violence. First, there is a hue and cry across the nation. Demonstrations are held. Congress is lobbied. The editorials are filled with opinions. In a matter of days, it fizzles out ... until the next time.

Could it be that the way we respond to these horrific events is itself fueled by the powers that defy God, the forces rebelling against God, the ways of sin that draw us from God?

Consider with me – there is, first of all, a good deal of blaming that takes place. Liberals blame conservatives. Conservatives blame liberals. Those attached to their guns double down in their justification of having them. People end up talking past each other. Rather, we shout past each other without really listening to one another.

Then there's the impulse to respond to violence with violence, assuming that if we just get tougher then the problem will go away, and this serves only to perpetuate a vicious cycle.

And then there's the indifference. We hear of one more shooting and tell ourselves that nobody is doing anything about it anyway. Why should we? Numbness sets in and the indifference is the way the powers want us to be.

Our reactions encompass chaos, violence, distraction. Are not these very responses earmarks of the very powers we renounce?

Listen to the news or read the news and there's plenty of angry speech and ideas about what can be done or left undone, but one thing is never named – and I suspect it never will be – and that is this: we often find ourselves in the grip of evil.

I lived on the Oregon Coast during a terrible shooting at Springfield High School about 50 miles away from where I lived, in Florence. A good friend was pastor of a congregation not very far from the school where the shooting occurred, and some of his youth were there. Pastor Zane did a lot of pastoral care and that care included some truth telling ... more than once, he reminded the parish that they ought never to be surprised by sin, and never be surprised when the powers of evil are acted out before our very eyes.

Evil is at work in these things. Now, this is no excuse to resign from the world or even shirk your own sin by saying, "the devil made me do it." I think we must first of all admit that we are complicit in the very things we renounce. I think we must then pray God to shape our lives to reflect God's heart:

- We do not scapegoat the criminals or the groups we hold responsible.
- We do not beat up on people we disagree with.
- We do not sanction violence by responding to it with more violence.
- We do not play the blame game.
- We do not resign from the planet.

In other words, don't give too much power away to the powers. They don't deserve it.

Instead, ask yourselves: what is the loving thing to do?

We have a dear friend who shared with us that upon hearing the news of the mass shooting, she may have been tempted into giving up, but instead got proactive, and is now getting active in an organization seeking responsibility around gun ownership. Her gesture brims with hope. It is a loving response.

My spiritual director for years often posed this question when I was discerning events in my life: “What’s the next loving step?” It’s a great question, especially when we get honest about ourselves and the world around us.

When confronted with greed, racism, exploitation, and violence, what is the loving thing to do for yourself and for your neighbors? Perhaps it will look like wholehearted generosity, speech that builds others up instead of tearing them down, seeking deeper community, and living in nonviolent ways, putting the best construction on a neighbor’s action instead of immediately condemning him or her, and speaking the truth in love.

You see, to renounce the things that go against the love of God is to actively embrace the practices that are centered in the things of God.

The preface in the Great Thanksgiving during Lent asks God to “cleanse our hearts and so prepare with joy for the Paschal Feast.” Take these words to heart. Doing business with sin and evil may not seem very joyous, but this 40 day journey may be filled with joy as we embrace a closer walk with Jesus and so embrace God’s life-giving ways. In fact, the classic disciplines of fasting, prayer, and works of love are full-bodied ways of stepping closer to God and experiencing joy and beauty.

Forty days is a long time, and such a time may have its wilderness moments. But it is no extended wilderness journey. Such a time as this is filled with much grace.

Yes, Jesus was in the wilderness contended with evil, but he wasn’t alone.

What did we hear earlier? Mark tells us that while Jesus was in the wilderness, the angels ministered to him. They waited on him. The ambassadors of God’s love were not far away, and these angels are not far from us either. Some of them, in fact, are here in this very Assembly.

So, with God’s help, we prepare with joy for the Easter feast. As we journey through these days, find your rest in Jesus and let these words – words that express your essential identity - resound in your ears and give them a home in your heart:

“You are my beloved daughter. You are my beloved son. With you I am well pleased.”
Amen.