

First Sunday in Lent – Year B
February 21, 2021
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- SERMON -

Before I get started, I would like to thank Maureen for her Mission Moment. At the 2009 General Convention, Lent was officially designated as a time to encourage dioceses, congregations and individuals to remember and support the life-saving work of Episcopal Relief & Development. The national Episcopal church invites all of us to pray for those living in need, including the One Thousand Days of Love program.

The Episcopal Relief & Development is already jumping in to help the millions who remain without power and water in the southern states this week. As extreme weather has devastated communities in Texas, Oklahoma, New Mexico, Louisiana and beyond, they are working with their local partners to provide relief and support.

People who have been devastated by inclement weather, and others around the world living in poor, undernourished environments, are being helped by this organization, and are given hope.

Hope.

What a great segue to a sermon, right?

So, today is the First Sunday in Lent.

This special 40-day period of Lent, leading to Easter, is a unique time for us to take inventory of our lives, to commune more intimately with God, and clear out those things that may distract us from our commitment to Him. A time of transformation —a journey that finds its climax (and turning point) at Easter.

In Genesis we read about the flood – a type of baptism, if you will. Noah and his family, only eight people, get on a boat with a lot of animals. The flood comes and water covers the earth. And while the analogy of the flood is a look backward at sin, it is also a look forward - to hope. There is a fundamental shift in humanity after the flood. There is a change. These are people who have been saved, through the waters. These are people who are beloved. No matter who they are or where they go from there, the fundamental part of their identity remains that they are people who have been rescued. Full stop.

We come to Jesus' baptism in the Gospel of Mark this morning. When John had been asked, "Are you the 'One'?" he answered that he was not the "One", but was the messenger preparing the way for the "One".

And yet people came to John to be baptized. They came to the wilderness, and to the water. Longing. Hoping. Expecting. Seeking something. And perhaps preparing for the “One”. Then the “One” appeared. Jesus of Nazareth. And John saw him coming, along with the recognition that today was the day the messenger would greet the Message. No words were needed because Jesus was the Word. Into the water Jesus came -- and was baptized.

And as he was coming up out of the water, dripping wet, he saw the heavens open and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven saying, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.” And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness.

Wait! What?!

That HAD been a beautiful story – Jesus is baptized. The Spirit descends like a dove. A voice from heaven saying, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”

And immediately, while still dripping wet, he is driven out to the wilderness? I don’t get it. Jesus the One, the Word, doesn’t even get to bask in being beloved. No polite invitation, but rather an urgent driving, compelling him into – the wilderness.

The Tempter was waiting.

And for 40 days Jesus would fast and be tested. And he proves himself.

Finally, the forty days are complete. The wilderness is now behind him, and his work lies ahead.

(Pause)

This past year has already been a year of testing for us, hasn’t it. But the Lenten season is still the Lenten season. As we go through this time of focus, of praying and preparing, we’ll be tempted to simply go through the motions. We may be more tempted to skirt around the “wilderness” altogether. But this year, THIS year, I feel we truly need to face Christ. To listen to Him and follow Him, to be renewed for new possibilities and prepared to hope once more.

The 40 days of Lent is a place of refining and self-discovery.

Our forbearers never faced the desert alone. For forty years, God journeyed with Israel. For forty days, God watched over Noah. For forty days, God stood with Jesus. And for our time, God will stand with us, as well.

You can do so through by joining in the class Understanding Our Faith starting next week, by getting serious with morning devotions, by looking in the mirror and seeing who you are and making a determination that you will take the steps necessary to become who you want to be in Christ, and by confession, ... by confession...

If we are honest with ourselves, we know deep down inside that we need the wilderness. We know in our bones and deep within our souls that the desert of Lent calls and compels us, even when we resist. Our church, our community, our world—now more than ever—needs the wilderness in order to find new ways of being the people of God.

I'm not just talking to you, I'm talking to myself. I'll be going through this Lenten season right along with you.

We go to listen for the voice of God calling us again.

We go to see Christ more clearly in the world around us.

We go because that is where we encounter God.

And at Easter when we remember our Baptism, we will find we are beloved. No matter who we are or where we go from there, the fundamental part of our identity remains in Christ.

So, as we enter into this season of Lent, through it all, we HOLD ONTO our identity in Christ.

The identity of God's beloved that ever reminds you that you are in him, and He is in you, with you, and for you.

Amen.