



MINISTER
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*1st Sunday in Lent
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*Genesis 9:8-17
Mark 1:9-15*

Upside Down Bow

Today is the first Sunday of Lent. The word lent comes from a Latin wording meaning the lengthening of days that occurs in the spring. But probably most of us think of Lent as that time when people give up something for God. When I was younger, I was always a little confused by this. It sounded to me like these people had borrowed something from God and now it was time for them to give up what they had been Lent. I guess the thing that confused me most was the idea that things like cake and ice cream were only on loan to us from God. I had always kind of thought of them as permanent ways of life. It is funny how things can lose their focus and meaning. I saw a cartoon the other day were one person turned to another and asked, "what are you going to give up for Lent, white or dark chocolate?"

Some will always see little they can get by with their faith. But the season of

Lent is one of the richest and most meaningful times in the whole church year. Lent has become a sacred pilgrimage of faith in which we are to be prepared and repaired in our souls in anticipation of Easter. It is a time for reflection, repentance, and renewal, three essentials of spiritual growth and vitality.

Lent is a time of grace, a time to begin again with God. No one is so far from God that they are not welcome again in the family of faith. Sometimes people think that they are beyond hope; that their faith is too small and their spirits too dry and their sins too great for even God to give them another chance. But in lent God searches for us, and brings us back into the family of God.

That being searched for and being found, that coming back changed, is a journey. Each one of us is on a journey with God. Journeying is an often used image to describe the changes we Christians encounter in our lives as we come to see

God in new ways. We say we are journeying, that things are not static and unchanging. In Jesus 'journey, and on our journeys, we will enter times of bewilderment and temptation. There are times of being in the wilderness. But it is in the wilderness that we come to see the depth and power of God's covenant promise to each one of us.

Last week we read of Jesus transfiguration on the mountain top. Peter and the others heard the voice coming out of the cloud that said "this is my beloved son". Jesus alone heard those words "this is my beloved son" as he came up out of the water at his baptism. Only after he went into the wilderness would he really know what it would mean for him to be God's son. It seems like quite a jolt for Jesus to go from the ecstatic moment of baptism, to then being thrown out into the wilderness. The Greek is quite clear about this, that Jesus was not simply in need of a spiritual retreat and he should go and spend sometime enjoying the woods. He was thrown out into the wilderness by the same spirit that assured him he was God's very own. Even Jesus, especially Jesus, is subject to the testing and temptations of what God is calling us to do and become.

How often do we feel that one moment we are on top of the world, and we can see everything clearly, and then

something comes crashing in and we are tested with some personal crisis, or financial problem? How often do we wonder how things could have changed so quickly?

In the Jordan, Jesus realized that God has chosen him to be the Messiah, the promised one. In the wilderness, he got would come to see what that means, and what the true messiah must be and do.

In the wilderness, Jesus faced not so much an external foe as a set of internal expectations, hopes that he may have had as to what it meant to be God's chosen. There are all sorts of things he could have done with power that God had entrusted him. What would he do with his ability to heal, cast out demons, and also with the knowledge that to be God's son would mean to die on a cross? What would he do with all that? How would we handle such power and such a call. He had to wrestle with this, before he began his ministry. He had to come to understand God's promise, God's covenant that was being made new through him.

Mark does not provide the details of the temptations that Jesus endured that the others gospel writers do. It simply says he was tempted and he prevailed. That is an important idea for us in faith. The testing was not something to be avoided, but something to stand up to. A desire to avoid temptation led people into lives of

self-imposed exile and seclusion. To live is to face temptation or testing on a daily basis. But Jesus is not alone with the temptations, he is attended to by angels, messengers who minister to him and will help him realize his true course. And we are not alone in the midst of our tests. That is the covenant we have with our God. Our God will never forsake us.

There are many covenants between God and the people of Israel; God made a covenant with Noah that there will be no more floods, never again will creation be destroyed and that is a unilateral promise by God. The rainbow which is the sign of that covenant is a lasting reminder of the promise. The Hebrew for bow is indeed a bow like a weapon, and that what God is doing with the rainbow is to nail the gun to wall. God is hanging the bow up upside down and saying God will not use force and power any more to compel and control people. God is giving up one way of being God and moving toward another. What would it be for you and I to hang up our bows, and no longer try to coerce or control people trying to make them into what we think they should be?

Some will imagine that the wilderness is optional, only for those who are extra serious about their faith and willing to journey out into the wilds. But it is a call to all Christians. Without the wilderness, there is no joy of celebration.

The fact is we cannot have an instant Easter. We can't just show up on Easter morning and shout that Christ is risen! And expect to be able to enter into the celebration of the resurrection. If we haven't reflected on the void in our lives that cries out for God, if we haven't looked into the disappointing meagerness of our souls.. then we will never really be able to celebrate the good news that death is defeated by life. In short to miss the wilderness is to stand at a distance and look unmoved upon the greatest moment and miracle of all eternity.

As we begin this season of lent, reflecting on our own covenant relationship with God, the sign of the rainbow reminds us that God has promised to remain faithful - even when we were faithless. God has promised to be with us in the wilderness and in the chaos of this world.

As Jesus went through the wilderness he had a great deal to give up. Can we give up our unattainable expectations of ourselves, others and God? Can we give up our need of having to always be in control? Can we give up our hardened hearts of for ones of flesh? Can we give all this up to the Lord who promises to take all these things and make them new and give them back to us? That is the promise, that is what our faith is about. It is to be willing to go into the wilderness with the spirit and to face all

that life sets before us and all that is within us, and to stand firm with the promise that God will never forsake us. And then, and only then, will we be able to see that gift of grace, the never failing promise that comes to us as a rainbow. This Lent let us look for those rainbows, AMEN.