

Lent One C  
St. David's  
February 21, 2010

“In the desert you can remember your name, cause there ain't no one for to give you no pain.”

Wednesday evening, we began the season of Lent by viewing the 40 days that lie ahead of us through the lens of near death experiences. We talked about what happens to many people after they have had a close encounter with death, and I shared Jean's and my own experience of heightened awareness of the beauty and majesty of creation after Jean's fall from a canyon in the Utah desert. We talked about the fact that if we can stop approaching this season as one of morbidity and dread, it has the opportunity to deepen our connection with all of creation, with each other and with God. Through that new way of seeing and through those connections, Lent can bring a vivid, new clarity to our lives, a clarity that comes through our heightened senses and awareness.

Today, on the first Sunday of Lent, that is exactly what happens to Jesus. He begins his Lenten experience by following the call of the Holy Spirit immediately after his baptism. Notice that the Spirit does not immediately send him out to accomplish his life mission. Instead, she sends him to the place where he can have his own near death experience, a place where it is easy to remember that we are dust and to dust we shall return. I imagine Jesus after his baptism reflecting on the words that he heard as he came up out of the river Jordan. “You are my Beloved, with whom I am well

pleased.” Now, Jesus needs to figure out what in the world that means to him in his daily life. So he heads to the desert, the place where, in the stilted poetry of the band America, you can go to remember your name, cause there ain’t no one for to give you no pain.” Jesus needs to remember his name. He needs to discern what it means to be Jesus.

I imagine his experience being much like my own when Jean faced death squarely in the face. I imagine that his senses were so heightened that he too saw and experienced the intense beauty of this place, even in a time when the world saw the desert as nothing but danger and foreboding. Through his new found connection with God’s creation, experienced through the intensity of the desert landscape and seen through the lens of his own mortality, I believe that Jesus experienced a clarity of vision so intense and so powerful that his whole life’s mission became clear to him. I believe he felt intensely his deep connection to God in a way that he never did before, and I believe those connections led him to a life that would be centered in intimately linking him with all of humanity.

That is what Lent offers all of us. It is our path to discernment. It is the way each of us can experience a quality of life beyond our imagination, an event so powerful that our connection to creation, to each other and to God will allow us to see clearly what it means to be us in the world. It offers us the opportunity to experience life at its fullest and at the same time help us to come to the realization of why we are here and what we are to accomplish in the rest of our time on earth.

Those of us here in Page have a huge advantage over urban Christians and those living in other places of the world. We have a desert very similar to the one where Jesus discovered his life mission. We can just walk outside and have the same opportunity. We also know how this works. The desert is Ash Wednesday, the place where you are constantly reminded of your own mortality, and your place in the universe. By placing ourselves in it, we are intimately connected to God's creation, allowing us the opportunity to place our lives in the wider perspective of the world. By giving ourselves time to think and discern, we too can discover this desert thing of centering yourself so that we can discern who we are. By getting connected to it, we get connected to each other and to God, all of which makes it much easier to discern who we are and what we are to do with our lives.

This is not to suggest that Lent should be a cake walk for us. Yes, I am absolutely suggesting that you ditch once and for all the idea that Lent is about self-mortification and making yourself feel worthless. That is, in fact, the opposite of what Jesus does with his Lent. But the practice of Lent, the practice of entering the deserts in our lives so that we can heighten our connection to creation and each other, is not a simple thing. Lent is Spring Training for our faith. It is the period of time before the event of our lives. It is not the game, it is the preparation for the game. It is not the Olympics, but it is the thousands of hours Olympic athletes put in to get to the Olympics. And a good Lent is like the preparation of American skater Evan Lysacek, whose coach had to make him stop practicing every day, who worked on that long

program that won him the gold medal four times every day for years. Lent is about putting in the thousands of hours of training necessary for us to become the best that we can be. Lent is being willing to enter the desert when you have no idea what might happen to you as a result. It is putting yourself in the wilderness and allowing God to enter that emptiness and show you where your life needs to go. A heightened experience of the beauty of life and clarity of vision are direct results of the Lenten experience. They are wonderful gifts. However, we also must not lose sight of the fact that our new discernment can also lead us to the cross.

As we hear this morning, Jesus put in that hard work and it pays off for him in spades. He comes out of the desert starving, but also understanding what it means to be Jesus and exactly what he is to do with his life. And while there was no one in the desert to give him pain, as the band America suggested, there certainly was someone to do so as soon as he got out.

Like the trickster in Native American tradition, the character of the devil in our Bible is the one who attempts to distract us from our purpose. It is the force in the universe that comes to us at our most vulnerable moments with what sounds like a great plan. There are many Christian traditions that suggest that this force is easily identifiable and the choices to avoid it are obvious and plain. The suggestion is that if you just read your Bible, the answers are there. But of course, that is not the way it works today with Jesus, or in our lives. We need a Lenten experience to clarify our direction and cement our will, chiefly because discernment choices are often

convoluted and ambiguous, just as the devil shows us today. Nothing that that he suggests to Jesus is obviously wrong or evil, and in fact, the devil very deftly uses the Bible to argue his point of view. Jesus is hungry and the devil suggests he turn stone to bread, just as Moses did in their 40 years in the desert. Sounds like a Biblical solution, doesn't it?

In the second temptation, Jesus must consider assuming control over the kingdoms of the world. That is, after all, what is expected of the Jewish Messiah and it is so written in the Bible. In the third temptation, the devil actually uses the Bible as proof of the goodness of his suggestion. "But Jesus, it is written in the scriptures that God is going to protect you. Don't you believe the Bible?"

It strikes me that the devil's arguments sound very much like the ones many of us hear fairly regularly. "You are a Christian, aren't you? Don't you believe in the word of God?"

As the ultimate biblical prooftexter, the devil shows us that life decisions are rarely simple and why we need a Lenten experience of clarity to discern God's will for us in our lives. The idea that all we need to do is read our Bible and all the answers will be revealed to us is pretty much shot down by the devil, isn't it? The Bible is just one tool of many we must use to come to those life conclusions and clarify our lives. It is not an answer book. The reason there are thousands of stories in it, is because there are no simple answers. What we get from it is the benefit of history. Like Jesus,

we too must interpret it for our present time and situation after having spent our own time in the desert discerning our role in life.

Because Jesus has done his Olympic training in the desert, he is able to discern that the devil's use of the Bible does not relate to him. Jesus's vision is clear and he is not distracted from his newly discovered goal. And unlike the Biblical tradition that expected their Messiah to rule with power and fame and a dash of magic as the devil suggested, that is not what Jesus found out about himself. His mission was to be one of us. He would change the world not by being a God, but by being a human, a human that would live and die like the rest of us. The temptations for Jesus today and throughout his life were the same ones that humans have faced from the beginning, the same ones that we face today.

In the verses that immediately precede today's Gospel, Jesus's genealogy is listed, directly linking him with Adam. I think that is important, because today's story of temptation seems to me directly linked with the temptation in the Garden of Eden. We might recall that Adam and Eve had a very similar conversation with the devil in the form of a serpent. They were also given the choice to eat, they from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. If they did, the serpent told them, they would be just like God. In fact, the next three stories in the Bible all have a similar theme, with the same temptation. The story of Cain and Abel is about breaking the human relationship, and a human believing that he can take on God's role of creating life and death. That is followed by the story of the flood, when virtually all humans break their relationship with

each other, thinking that they have the power of God. And just to be sure we get it, the following story is the tower of Babel, the one where people get so disconnected from one another that they can no longer communicate. That happens when they try to build an actual tower so that they can be Gods themselves.

Those are the same temptations Jesus faces today. Use your power and turn sandstone into sourdough. Become famous and be like a god. Jump off the mountain and you will be saved because you are God. But unlike the four stories that begin the Bible, Jesus is different. He chooses to not be God. He chooses to be a human being.

In this way, Jesus becomes our ultimate example. This is not a story of a divine being that we can only look up toward. What today's story tells us is that Jesus chooses to reveal God to us by staying a human being, just like us. That means that we can do it too.

The first four stories in the Bible show us what happens when we try to be God. Things fall apart, chaos ensues, and we become disconnected from one another, from Creation and from God.

But by choosing the path of humanity today, Jesus shows us that we can break the cycle. Through a path of discernment, we too can recognize the constant temptations to be God and we can avoid them. We too can discover what it means to be human, what it means to be Sharon or Rufus or Bill. We can remember our own name, discover our own purpose and find clarity in our lives, through the power of our

own desert experience, all of which will keep us connected to the beauty around us, to each other and to God.

The other major temptation offered to Jesus today is one we especially face in our society today. What the devil offers him is the quick fix. “Just wave your hand and everything will be solved.” In our world of instant gratification, concern for the immediate bottom line, and our inability to look beyond ourselves and our own generation, we have become the masters of forgetting about tomorrow so that we can have more reward today. That may be the most important lesson of all in our Lenten experience. Lent is here to remind us to avoid simple solutions to complex problems, to take the time to enter the desert and discern a path that will have lasting effect. Lent is about being in a place where we accept the fact that we don’t know the answers, where we will sometimes feel like we don’t know anything, where we may even question our faith. Lent is about being in that place and not reaching for the easy solution. It is about being taking time to discern before leaping to a solution.

In our tradition, this is called living in ambiguity. That is Lent. The time will come when we will leave the desert. But for now, be still and know that we are not God. Be still and wait for that clarity of vision that only comes through the desert of Lent.

***“I can see clearly now.”***

Amen.