

Lent I Year B 2015

Yesterday we elected the Rev. Russell Kendrick as the fourth bishop of the diocese of the Central Gulf Coast. Russell was ordained to the priesthood at Nativity Church in Dothan Alabama, my home parish. He served for four years as curate there just a few years before I left home for seminary. Russell was an architect in Ft. Walton Beach before he went to seminary... worked with his father... like I once did. His second child was born in Dothan... Russell has served as Rector of two parishes... one in Newnan Ga. And the other in Birmingham... As far as measurements go he's been successful.... He's a really... really good guy... one of the most likeable people I know... He's passionate, sensitive, creative.... He's a good preacher (that will be a change!) He loves to cook.... But he's not perfect, of course.... He likes to please people.... But who doesn't? Before he gets consecrated I need to bring him up to speed in a few matters of theology. At the walkabout/ town meeting in Daphne; that was the whirlwind tour that all the bishop candidates participated in, he was asked a question by the moderator about whether his theology was hard and fast, consistent, settled once and for all.... And his answer was that no, certainly not... He said that his theology changes all the time.... Man after my own heart.... In fact I would digress to say that to have an open ended theology is much more like the very mind of God.... A mind that changes and evolves and learns, maybe even by mistakes.... a mind awestruck by new revelation... A mind that is forever changing so as to encounter and embrace the change all around us.... Mutability and transience demand an open mind, do they not... So, what I think that means about God and about us made in God's image, is that God is much more at home with potential and possibility than with certainty and prescribed order....

So I'm happy about Russell, despite his imperfection (which the process the church employs for calling a bishop would have us think perfection possible).... but I'm happy for him and us... you'll like him... but for the last twenty four hours I've been wondering what he must feel like... this huge change of life.... A culminating event in a career... this ultimate affirmation. I'm sure he's thrilled; I'm sure nervous... but to have one's ministry, a ministry to which he has given his life... to have one's ministry affirmed like this has to be overwhelming... He's made the grade...

Over the last several days we as a diocese in convention have invoked the presence of the Holy Spirit a lot more than once... asking the Holy Spirit to help us choose the right candidate.... And I imagine upon hearing that he was the one elected, Russell probably felt as Jesus felt when the heavens

opened up and he saw the Spirit descend on him and proclaim him loved and exceptional... I'm sure it was quite overwhelming... I'm sure it is an awesome feeling.... But funny thing about the Spirit... the Holy Spirit is all about truth... It's not about granting requests, nor about lighting up rooms with smiles... It is about truth, and change... It's about potential and possibility...and it's about freedom.... and don't ever doubt it, the Holy Spirit will go to great lengths to have its way... It will rack our bodies and souls shaking us free from what binds us... so that we might be useful.... Useful, to be about engendering God's reign on earth... That's the intuition of the Spirit.... Not success, or meeting goals or quotas... but making room for the possibility of God's love to take root in the here and now.

That is what I think our passage today taken from Mark's prologue is all about...In fact this is every bit as much a story about the Spirit as it is about Jesus; the narrative action in this passage is about the Spirit... Jesus is affirmed as God's son, God's beloved... one on whom the Spirit descends.... But the Spirit doesn't rest upon him long basking in the glow... instead the Spirit flings Jesus (yes flings) out into the desert to be tried and tested. (the Koine Greek that here translates as 'drove'.... Is better translated flung)The literary device here is obvious, Jesus' forty days in the wilderness would remind any good Jew of the sojourn of Israel in the Sinai desert for forty years.... Israel the disobedient Son... contrasted here with Jesus the obedient son... what is not so obvious here... and not so obvious because we get so hung up on the "son of God thing, and the perfection thing... that we can't relate to the figure of Jesus... what is not obvious but I think nonetheless true is that this is not all about Jesus a separate being consigned to iconography aloof in the heavens, but this story is all about potential, Jesus the archetype of potential... He is chosen... he is beloved... but if he is going to be of any use then he must have his trial in the desert, that place where illusions dry up in the scorching desert winds... a place of danger and violence and vulnerability, a place of fragile contingency... It is a place in which if one is to live then one must pay close attention... This story is a story of not, boom, here I am to save the day... but instead it is a story of the baptized being chosen and loved... and the willingness, or the call to willingness to do the work... out there and in here.... The willingness to come to terms with the reality that is ourselves and the reality around us... That's what happens in the desert.

Brothers and sisters, our illusions, our fears and anxieties that we hold on to... what we think we own... what we think we have... even our cherished relationships are changing, ultimately passing away.. It takes a good forty days in the desert to see that....But invaluable knowledge. What

Jesus is modeling here is a willingness to be flung out in the desert... to be tried, challenged, honed so that he can be of use... Our baggage... and we Americans have a lot of it, of course... our baggage will weigh us down... We have to be willing to be flung out with the wild beasts, and all other contentions of our world, leaving our stuff behind.... And if we are willing... willing to offer ourselves, all of ourselves, then the Spirit will show us the truth... and dear friends of God the truth will set us free in a way we hadn't dreamed possible.

Maybe Russell has already been flung... If he hasn't been... he surely will be.... There's a lot of flinging that goes on in our lives... flinging us into the desert wastes to come to terms with ourselves... to know that we are loved and chosen... and that God needs us for the continuing act of creation... So the next time you find yourself flung out among the wild beasts and the oppressive ways of illusion, remember there are angels there as well... and remember that it most probably the Spirit doing the flinging... So take heart if you dare... you are being prepared and seasoned for sacred work... work that will set the captives free... work that will heal the sick, work that will give sight to the blind... work that will raise the very dead... work that will bring potential and possibility and change to our world... Hope in short.... Now that is overwhelming... that is awesome... so says the Spirit.