

Lent 1, Yr C, 02-21-10
All Saints Episcopal Church

Lent, again. Since it's the beginning of a new church season, let's review where we've been recently. The lectionary during the season of Epiphany has been challenging. We've been led from the baptism of Jesus in Luke's Gospel, to the beginning of Jesus' ministry in John's Gospel (a festive wedding where Jesus turns water into wine); back to Luke's Gospel for Jesus' inaugural address in his hometown synagogue, followed by a very unpleasant reaction to his words on the part of the same hometown crowd; to the calling of the first disciples; and finally, to the Transfiguration, which occurs all the way "forward," in chapter nine of Luke's Gospel.

In all these readings, God shows Godself in the world: it's no wonder then that Epiphany is called a season of light. We've also been learning who Jesus *is* during this Epiphany season, as the stage is set for his ministry. And we've been learning about Luke's Gospel: Luke has been preparing us for what Jesus is going to do, and what he is going to teach, by making sure we have a clear sense of who he *is*. That should help us to understand *why* he does what he does.

Lent is a very different kind of season from Epiphany, beginning on a somber note, in the deserted wilderness, with a story that reminds us of traditional Lenten practices like fasting, giving things up, and spending time deep in prayer. The story sets the tone for all those resolutions we've made for the next six weeks. However, we usually tend to be so distracted by worrying about what we're *supposed* to do, or intend to do, that we lose track of what the story's really about, and what God is doing out there in the wilderness. Of course, we were told quite clearly on the first Sunday in Epiphany, by the voice from heaven at Jesus' baptism, that he is the Son of God. But today's lesson is more about the way, and the why, Jesus is going to go about his ministry: it's about setting the ground rules. The Son of God is not here to grab power for himself, or to show off how much he matters to God, or to work magic for the masses.

Luke never lets us forget that the Spirit of God is with Jesus, not just at his baptism, and not just in the wilderness, but also throughout the entire Gospel. After Jesus' baptism, he goes out, led by the Spirit, to a long time of reflection and fasting in the wilderness. If you've been watching any of the Winter Olympics, you've seen 'up close and personal' stories about many athletes who have faced trials and tests in preparing for what is their vocation: injuries, lost motivation, physical limitations. The story in Luke is sort of the same thing: an 'up close and personal' account about the tests Jesus faces as he prepares for what he is going to do for the rest of his life.

Of course, it's not really up close because Jesus is the only one out there, but Luke gives us a sense of the struggle - the test - that Jesus faces, out there in the wilderness. It's a struggle that most all of us go through as well, except probably not on such a grand scale: we want to be relevant, we want to be in control, and we want to be noticed. "You want to be relevant?" Satan asks Jesus. "Then turn these stones into bread." "You want to be in charge? Here's a whole empire of kingdoms and all the power and glory that goes with it." "You want to be noticed? Then take a flying leap off the pinnacle of this lofty temple. Surely the angels won't let anything happen to the Son of God himself."

[Now, as an aside: most of us probably wonder about "the devil" Jesus encounters in the wilderness. Commentators describe him, of course, as the personification of evil, but it is safe to say that Luke did not envision someone with horns, a pitchfork, pointy tail and red long johns. What might be more the case is to imagine a seductive voice offering very "good" things to Jesus - not a voice from a visible figure standing next to him, but maybe an idea in his head. He was hungry and alone; his struggle included being fully human and fully divine - should he use his divine 'powers' to defeat the devil? And notice that the devil not only offers attractive things but backs them up by quoting Scripture, which just shows how easily the Bible can be, has been, and continues to be, used for entirely wrong purposes.]

But I digress...

Jesus' reply to that seductive voice in all three tests is to reject the offers: "One does not live by bread alone." "Worship the Lord your God, and serve only God." "Do not put the Lord your God to the test."

But what does that have to do with us? Barbara Brown Taylor, an Episcopal priest who has a most incredible way with words, describes Lent as 'an Outward Bound for the soul.' You do things in groups at first, but, Taylor says, 'the real test comes when you go solo.' They take you out in the middle of nowhere and then everyone disappears and you're out there for the next 24 hours, alone. She says that's when you find out who you really are, what you really miss, and what you are really afraid of. Some people want their favorite food, a door with a lock on it, or just a pillow. 'But they all find out what their pacifiers are -- the habits, substances or surroundings they use to comfort themselves, to block out pain and fear.'

'Without those things they are suddenly exposed, like someone addicted to painkillers

whose prescription has just run out. It is hard. It is awful. It is necessary, to encounter the world without anesthesia, to find out what life is like with no comfort but God.' Taylor is convinced that '99 percent of us are addicted to something, whether it is eating, shopping, blaming or taking care of other people. The simplest definition of an addiction is anything we use to fill the empty place inside of us that belongs to God alone.' Our addictions are our 'pacifiers' - the things we stick in our mouths to relieve the emptiness we feel inside us. They don't give us any nourishment, 'but at least they plug the hole.'

She goes on to say, 'To enter the wilderness is to leave them behind, and nothing is too small to give up. Even a chocolate bar will do. For 40 days, simply pay attention to how often your mind travels in that direction. Ask yourself why it happens when it happens. What is going on when you start craving a Mars bar? Are you hungry? Well, what is wrong with being hungry? Are you lonely? What is so bad about being alone? Try sitting with the feeling instead of fixing it and see what you find out.'

'Chances are you will hear a voice in your head that keeps warning you what will happen if you give up your pacifier. "You'll starve. You'll go nuts. You won't be you anymore." If that does not work, the voice will move to level two: "That's not a pacifier. That's a power tool. Can't you tell the difference?" If you do not fall for that one, there is always level three: "If God really loves you, you can do whatever you want. Why waste your time on this dumb exercise?"

Taylor finishes by saying if you don't know to whom that voice belongs, then read Luke's story again. 'Then tell the devil to get lost and decide what you will do for Lent. Better yet, decide whose you will be. Worship the Lord your God and serve no one else. Expect great things, from God and from yourself. Believe that everything is possible. Why should any of us settle for less?' (Christian Century, 1998)