

“FIRST IMPRESSIONS” 1ST SUNDAY OF LENT
Genesis 9: 8-15 Psalm 25 I Peter 3: 18-22 Mark 1: 12-15
By Jude Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

The gospel tells us that Jesus spent time in the desert. Deserts---what are they for us? The hard testing times when we wander and wonder?... The anxieties that accompany poor health, losing a job, having our kids get in trouble after all our hard work raising them...the events that cause us to wonder where God is?.... Are they the temptations to compromise our ideals... should we go back on a promise made? Should we cut corners in our lives and live with less integrity? The desert can take many shapes in our lives.

For the Jews, the desert was a place where their confidence in God was tested. The desert was not a “success story” for them; but it was for God, because God guided them through the desert and fed the people on their arduous journey with both physical and spiritual food. Even when they turned away from God and looked to other gods, God stayed with them, eventually leading them out. By the time the desert wanderings were over, the people of Israel had come to know that even with their infidelities, God is faithful and never gives up on us.

I notice that Mark did not add details about the temptation in the desert. He is intentional and the preacher should not look to the other Synoptics for elaboration. That is not what Mark is doing. John the Baptist had promised earlier in Mark that, "one more powerful" was coming. Maybe that's why the temptation scene is so brief, seemingly dismissed by Mark in a brief statement. Mark seems to be both emphasizing the powerful One's ability to resist the tests and illustrating that the same power is available for us. Jesus has just heard the voice from God at his baptism in the Jordan, the voice said that God's favor rests on him. The next verse (our Gospel today) says the Spirit "sent" ("drove" is a better word, it conveys the force and intention of the Spirit) him to the desert. It's as if the claim of honor made over him at the Jordan is tested; is the compliment true or false? Is Jesus favored or not? What does the “favor” of God look like anyway? It doesn't guarantee an exemption from the human situation. God's favor doesn't spare Jesus from the testing.

When we are hard tested by what life throws at us, this is not a sign that we are out

of favor with God--nor should the preacher suggest that the many testing life offers are from God. The "testing," Mark says, is from Satan, an evil source. God stands with the favored One and does not abandon him as he undergoes his trial. Does God care for us in our hostile environs? The passage suggests God is there in the testing places of our lives. Note the details of the story: Jesus is in the desert for 40 days, he is among the wild beasts, and, during all this, there are angels "ministering" to Jesus. The tests was real, the dangers palpable, but the strength is there through it all. God doesn't wait to see how we manage the testings of our lives and then, if we do well, reward us. There is help all through the ordeal. Have we noticed? Don't we look back on past difficult times and say, "I could never have made it if God hadn't given me the strength." Can we trust that this is still true as we face the current moment of trial?

A young man in his mid-twenties works with the youth of his parish. But that was not always his goal or ambition. He had been frittering away his life, he said, looking out for himself, living only in the present. A few years ago, he accepted an invitation to join a group of people going to the Virginia mountains to make a "vision quest." After a couple days of training in survival tactics and the discipline of spiritual exercise, the participants were sent out individually to spend four days by themselves in the mountainous wilderness. The young man shared some of the events of those days with a group of us who had gathered to reflect on today's Gospel. First, he said, there was the extraordinary quiet and a lack of the usual distractions; no tv, radio, computers, video games, phones, pagers, and the devices that have become so much a part of our daily modern and hectic lives. It was, he said, so quiet. He began to hear sounds he might ordinarily have missed: the breeze, songs of distant birds, his footsteps, insects and his own breathing.

He also began to hear his inner voice. Questions were being put to him about his life. He found that being in the wilderness was a chance to do some serious thinking for the first time in his adult years. A couple things he saw in nature started the process for him. One day he came across a dead horse rotting in a field and a few moments later he saw a fragile new born doe. These contrasting sights stirred questions about his basic life assumptions. He realized, when he reflected on the sight of the dead horse, that he had been investing his life in passing realities. The doe reminded him how fragile life is, especially young life. He decided during those four days to turn his life around and dedicate himself to ministering to youth. He would quit his job, accept a lower paying position to be a

youth minister in his parish. We asked if he had found being alone in the wilderness dangerous. "No," he said, "All the while I felt as if the wilderness were sustaining me." Maybe that's what it means when it says today that angels ministered to Jesus in the desert. The young man's experience might encourage us to take some time apart this Lent to listen to our own inner voices. We may not be able to go off to the mountains, but we could decide to set some extra time aside to pray and listen. We could begin by cutting back on our television viewing and using that time for a "vision quest" in our own homes--- with the scriptures, in conversation with family members, before a lighted candle in quiet---the possibilities are only limited by one's imagination.

How about an allusion in our preaching to Ash Wednesday just passed? Ash Wednesday was a sobering reminder. Those ugly ashes smeared on our foreheads sprinkled down and dusted our shirts and blouses. We quickly brushed them off our clothes. Do we do the same with their significance in our lives--- brush it all away? The ashes are a grim reminder that death is our fate. (Ever see those paintings of medieval saints contemplating a skull they hold in their hand?) We return to dust from which we came, a death sentence, the fruit of mortality. We were created and we will have an end; we can't avoid our creatureliness. Our feelings and illusions of dominance and success are passing. We are limited; the Grim Reaper reminds us that our hopes and projects are extinguished. Grim thoughts on a sunny day?

We need to face the truth so that we can live our lives with perspective. We are creatures of the dust but breathed into by the Spirit of Jesus who calls us to be followers of his and live in the reign he proclaims in today's Gospel, a dominion of spirit-filled brothers and sisters, one with each another and the earth. If this is not how we live, adjustments have to be made. Hear Jesus in the gospel telling us to re-form our lives. Lent is the season that sobers us up from our delusions and gives us the Spirit of the "powerful One" so that we can be reshaped according to his life. We can even look death in the face and not be afraid because Jesus comes from his own desert experience, disarms death, and takes us through it to the other side. The time is fulfilled, he tells us, we don't have to go it alone. Whether we are trapped by fear of our mortal body's death, or by the trap of sin that is leading us to death, we are not in the struggle alone. Jesus will feed us in the desert with whatever manna we need to overcome death's clutches.

John Kavanaugh, S.J. calls Lent our "Christian Yom Kippur." It is our time of

critical self-evaluation. It is an invitation to think things over, to reconsider, to be more aware of our limitations, our mortality and our need for God and the transforming grace God offers us through "the Christ of the desert." We reminded today that even as we look at our brokenness and sin, we have a Lord who has preceded us in this journey. He knows the way in and out of the desert and can help us get through our own deserts. There is consolation in Lent, it is not the bleak season it first appears to be. In Lent we are given hope. Even as we fix a sober gaze upon our darkness, we can find hope and assurance that we will be pulled through by the powerful One.

Wake Up! Lent is a bell to wake us. No one likes to be awakened from sleep, but that is what the grace of Lent is trying to do for us. Here is a chance to leave our self-securities and turn to God. Lent is a "vision quest" we are offered each year when God will show us the way to make the divine life planted in us spring to fuller life. We'll need to re-form our vision, our attitudes, our way of looking at the world around us. We'll need to let go of some of the old securities and familiarities. With God's help, here is a chance to let go of some of the old self, the old stuff of our lives. We have 40 days of focus time ahead of us. Like the optometrist who makes those adjustments on the viewer during our eye exam until we see the blurred letters become EDNFP, so God is helping us see ourselves and others more clearly this Lent.

Hear the One who comes from his own desert cry out, "The time is fulfilled!" We need to change and here is One who is saying that help is on the way. "The Reign of God is at hand," he shouts. We are invited to participate more fully in God's higher order and be part of a better and larger union with others. To be a member of this reign is to be in harmony with God and to direct our energies towards being in harmony with others. What other "reigns" have our attention, have drawn us aside and distracted us? It's time, Jesus says, to recommit to the reign he is proclaiming and let go of other loyalties, as attractive and populated as they may be.

ONE GOOD BOOK FOR THE PREACHER

Monika K. Hellwig, GLADNESS THEIR ESCORT: HOMILETIC REFLECTIONS FOR SUNDAYS AND FEASTDAYS, YEARS A, B AND C. Wilmington: Michael Glazier, Inc., 1987.

These reflections first appeared in AMERICA magazine as a weekly commentary on the Sunday readings. They are excellent; a fine theologian uses practical

wisdom to apply the readings to our lives. The book may no longer be in print, but it is worth hunting down.

QUOTABLE

Jesus, coming newly from the desert where the voice of John has been forever silenced, utters a declaration, a promise and a call. The declaration is that the time is now—a time of fulfillment, of vindication, of power. The promise is that God's own rule in human society is at hand. It is in some ways the same promise as that of the covenant of the rainbow; God is faithful, God guarantees that creation can work in harmony by the Creator's laws. Yet it is also, in another sense, a new promise; Jesus in his person is the reason that God's rule is at hand in a way it never was before.

But there is also a call. As in the covenant of the rainbow, there is an exigence. There is a response called forth from the freedom of human creatures, to participate in the harmony of creation and in the renewed harmony of redemption. Jesus asks for two attitudes. He asks for repentance—for a turning around, a willingness to begin again, a willingness to change one's mind and perceptions and behavior. He also asks for faith in the Good News. He asks that we do him the courtesy of believing that it is true, that it is possible, that it can happen. In other words, he asks us to remember the covenant.

-----Monika K. Hellwig, page 166.

READERS' RESPONSE

SOME PRACTICAL WAYS TO APPROACH A HOLY FAST

Fast from guzzling gas. Drive the speed limit. Ride public transportation. Ride a bike or walk when you can. Car pool.

Fast from compulsive consumerism. Check your closets, cupboards, storage rooms and garage. How many items have you collected that you thought you needed—until you got them home and had “buyer's remorse?” Choose some of these areas in your house to clean out. Fix, clean and deliver these items to those who need them more than you do (or donate them to the yard sale).

Examine the ways in which you consume and waste, using up nature's resources and adding to landfills or air and water pollution. Shorten your showers. Save the warm-up water for your garden. Eat your leftovers at the next meal. Recycle religiously. Refuse to use plastic. Use your own shopping sack. Write on both sides of your paper or recycle your paper as scratch pads. Lower the thermostat or air-conditioner. Wear a sweater, add a blanket—or take them off.

Examine your diet and resolve to make the necessary changes if it is not

healthy. Examine your eating habits and change them if you eat impulsively, constantly, too fast, unconsciously or without savoring your food, with disinterest, without care or dignity.

Return to a sense of the sacramental at mealtime in your home. Present all meals with dignity. Take at least forty-five minutes to eat your dinner. (The average American family eats a whole meal in five minutes)

Learn to cook and serve the foods the poor eat. Tasty and healthful meals can be made from lentils, rice, grains, and legumes which, eaten together, offer all the protein you need.

Begin planning or planting a vegetable garden or herb patch. Growing, tending, harvesting, sharing and eating your own produce brings us down to earth and is often a healing experience.

If you have no difficulties with any of these suggestions, consider other ways of “fasting.” During Lent we can ask ourselves: What does my baptism cost me?

“Surely it asks us to fast from our sinful behaviors.”

I can sure see that I have some reflecting to do on some of my habits. I invite you to join with me in some self-examination and to change at least one behavior this Lenten season. May your FAST become a new kind of FEAST. May your Lenten journey become a time of self-discovery.

-----submitted by Rev. Patti Spooner Walther, from “The Circuit Rider”, the newsletter of the First United Methodist Church, Watsonville, California, March 1999.

ANNOUNCEMENTS

Our webpage addresses: <https://www.PreacherExchange.com>

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Thank you.

“Blessings on your preaching”,

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