

The First Sunday in Lent, 13 March 2011
Saint James Episcopal Church, Tigard, Oregon
The Rev'd Rags Ragan, Rector

The season is purple again, a time of quiet and solemnity, a time of waiting and preparing for great things to come. I have always loved the purple seasons. In my childhood church, the incense was more potent and the music more moving during Lent, so that I learned to love it before I learned to understand it.

Lent is a time of hunkering down and settling in. It is a lovely time, a time set apart to spend with God.

What makes it most lovely is the knowledge of the goal, which in Lent is the knowledge of God's infinite love for us ultimately expressed in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. This once and future event for us, this ultimate event of salvation history, is what brought us to God and still draws us. It is there already and yet this is our time of waiting and preparing for it.

We always begin Lent with a telling of Jesus' time in the wilderness, his time of preparation for active ministry, which is the model for our preparation time in Lent. It varies slightly from year to year as we hear the different emphases of Matthew or Mark or Luke, but the story is the same

Jesus goes to John at the Jordan and listens to his cousin shouting loudly about the sins of the present time (something we can all easily recognize) and presents himself for baptism, validating John's call. Then, as Jesus comes up out of the water, a voice proclaims him God's son, the beloved; with whom God is well pleased, as it will again at the end of his ministry, on the Mount of the Transfiguration as we heard last week.

Then Jesus is immediately driven out into the Wilderness.
Consider the key elements of that time in the wilderness:

The Spirit drove him out.

Satan tempted him.

Wild beasts were his companions.

Angels ministered to him.

It seems to me that this is an apt description of the life of any Christian, not only during Lent, but all the time. It is the Spirit of God which sends us out, into the world when we are tempted to stay within the safe confines of the Church, and into the solitude of the wilderness when we are tempted to get lost in the noisy demands of worldly life. The Spirit sends us where we are needed and where we need to be. But we are not truly alone there.

First, we find temptations of all sorts, no matter whether we are trying to do the work of God or trying to ignore God. The temptations are simply part of daily life for everyone. And our temptations are custom tailored. The temptations presented to each of us differ, as we do, and so what would have no appeal to one becomes a major test for someone else. Finding God's path for us is never easy and unchallenged.

Then we are surrounded by wild beasts. Depending on your own predilections, this can sound wonderful or horrible, as with most things in God's world. The wild beasts can represent all the natural beauty and unspoiled splendor of God's creation, unconfused by the muddle of human doubts and concerns.

It can sound like the most excellent sort of companionship for drawing us to God. As Father Zosima insists in *The Brothers Karamazov*, the animals live in a state of pure communion with God, following his will effortlessly and so are valuable companions to our quest.

But the wild beasts can also be seen as all the dangers of this world. They can be the unenlightened people who draw us aside from our quest for God, or the noisy chaos of the world which distracts us from our spiritual quest, or all that frightens us and makes our spirits small and closed in self-protection.

But we are not alone with the beasts and the temptations. There are angels to wait on us. What a wonderful thing. Perhaps they bring us honey to sustain us, or fan us with their wings to protect us from the heat, or stand between us and the ravaging wild beasts, or sing to us sweet songs of God's love and goodness. Like Jesus in the wilderness, we are always guided and guarded by 'angels and ministers of grace' so that we may come safely home to God.

Jesus' time in the wilderness was not an easy time, as any of you who have been in the Judean wilderness know. It was a time of struggle and learning and growing stronger for the task which lay ahead. So too our time in Lent may not be an easy time. Our spiritual lives may sometimes have the starkness of that barren desert. But remaining within that wilderness, that place apart focusing on the life of the spirit, we too will learn and grow stronger.

It is lovely to have a time set apart regularly that reminds us to do this, to be authorized, indeed commanded, to do something so delicious as to spend more time in quiet, more time in prayer, more time in study, more time looking after the needs of others, more time becoming acquainted with the heart and life of God. We are very lucky.

Lent is fundamentally a time of learning, learning about God and God's work in history and God's work in us, learning about our own calling, learning about God's world and our path through it. Learning about God, we come to trust God, and this trust enables us to go out into the wilderness, or into our own private place of study and prayer, with confidence.

There is joy in taking this time out for God. For in doing so we find our true selves and our greatest love.

There is joy in finding God in the midst of silence, as Elijah did, in hearing and seeing and knowing what seems beyond our abilities to sense and so finding ourselves connected with the heart of the universe and upheld by the love which gives us all life.

Jesus said that he came to bring joy and abundance of life, but our lives seem more and more to be characterized by gloom and narrowness of life. We concentrate on the evil in the world and are constricted by fear in all of our dealings with the world and one another. Compassion and magnanimity, which were originally the hallmark of the Christian community, have been eaten away, even as the spirit of the world at large gets darker and more self-protective.

Fear is our enemy, fear of death, fear of illness, fear of being taken advantage of, fear of loneliness, fear of loss. All of these cut us off from one another and from God. What we need is open hearts and open hands, to experience and share the love that is the source of all things, that is God.

One of the Proper prefaces for Lent prays, "You bid your faithful people cleanse their hearts, and prepare with joy for the Paschal feast; that, fervent in prayer and in works of mercy, and renewed by your Word and Sacraments, they may come to the fullness of grace which you have prepared for those who love you."

Preparation for the great feast of Jesus' Passover from Death to New Life should indeed be joyful, filled with prayer and merciful deeds, study and communion. Joy characterizes coming to the fullness of God's grace.

I have a delightful book by Barbara Holland entitled *Endangered Pleasures*, which is not overtly about the spiritual life, but rather about the simple daily pleasures that are fast disappearing from our common experience.

It does, however, in its elegant and eloquent wit, have much to say about that joy and abundance of life which is meant to be ours. Ms. Holland writes, "Subtly, in little ways, joy has been leaking out of our lives."

Lent should not be a time to narrow our delights and go frowning through our disciplines. Lent is at heart a time of joy, a time of moving ever closer to the heart of God and to a clearer understanding of God's purpose in our lives. The joys of quiet and meditation are offered to us.

One of the most wonderful lines from *Endangered Pleasures* says, “Gloom we have always with us, a rank and sturdy weed, but joy requires tending.” Lent can be for us a time of tending joy, the joy we know as children of a most merciful and loving Father.

May we all know the joy of a devout and holy Lent, and the greater joy of plunging at the end into the Paschal mystery, Christ’s mysterious and wonderful conquest of death and evil by divine love. Amen.