

Spg#197, LENT 1B

March 1, 2009

Genesis 9:8-17

1 Peter 3:18-22

Mark 1:9-15

And so, we enter that distinctive part of the church year we call Lent. There are many descriptors for this season. We speak of Lent being a time of preparation, a time of self-examination. We indirectly refer to the austerity of Lent when we say we are going to give up something for Lent. Lent is a time to go through, an experience to go through on our journey in the Christian life.

Like Lent Baptism is also an experience to go through. It is passing through water, from an old life, through the water of baptism to a new life in Christ. Passing through water has precedents in the Old and New Testaments. The people of Israel passed through the waters of the Red Sea on their way to a new life in the promised land.

In the New Testament Jesus asked John the Baptizer to baptize him in the River Jordan. We refer to the sacrament of Baptism as the rite of initiation. In the Church we sacramentally enter the Christian life through Baptism. The font is usually found near a door as it indicates a beginning. Many of us spend our whole lives reflecting on the nature of our Baptism. When a young child is baptized parents and godparents agree to help the child interpret the meaning of his/her own Baptism.

For my own approach I believe that Baptism and Lent are best understood as two dynamics. And it is helpful to define such dynamics as Baptism and Lent. But the real value is in understanding the dynamics. Baptism has a dual nature about it. It is a beginning. But it lasts your whole life.

Water has that duality about it. Within its imagery is the dynamic tension between life and death, between old and new, between building up and destruction.

In a similar way, perhaps that makes us cognizant of the tension of Lent. Called to be a follower of Christ. Called into a faith that grows and expands. And yet life presents us with a choice or a contrast. We can agree to the journey of a growing and expanding faith. Or we can make the Christian life less than what it was meant to be. We can move toward reducing the faith. In today's gospel, Mark points out that after Jesus was baptized, the Spirit drove him into the wilderness where he was presented with the choice of going the other way.

In today's reading is found the word tempted. In popular usage the term has some connotation of being beguiled. There is the connotation of being enticed away from a growing faith. And so in today's gospel Jesus is not merely presented with a choice. Satan tries to trick him and entice him away from his calling. The story tries to paint a picture of both I think, a picture of beguiling and temptation, and a picture of choice and contrast.

So, we in the church have inherited this two sided reality of being beguiled or tempted and being presented with a choice. It may be that we have excessively romanticized this idea of being beguiled. And I think there were more believers in days gone by who overtly wrestled daily with the crafts and assaults of the devil. And their primary struggle in the Christian life was the struggle in the face of being tricked or beguiled.

And when someone suffered a bad day, it was because they had succumbed to something last Saturday night. And what was needed was that they should be absolved of their misbehavior, their sin. Once they had confessed and been absolved, then they were cleansed, until they were beguiled again. But even those who had not been out on Saturday night were not exempt. For some of them would be beguiled into thinking bad thoughts. A C.S. Lewis classic was The Screwtape Letters where Satan attempts to trick and deceive the faithful. One of the problems was that people were so intent on not succumbing to temptation that they forgot to take the responsibility of making wise choices.

When I first came into the Episcopal Church in 1978 we were worshipping in Virginia out of the 1928 Book of Common Prayer. In the Confession in that Eucharist were the words, "Be merciful to us, O Lord, miserable offenders. There is no health in us."

I think the idea was that if we could just say how bad our sin really is, or even if we could make it sound worse than it really was, then we had a chance at being absolved and forgiven. So sin, big or little, was not just unfortunate or tragic. It was a felony against God. And if we did not have a sense of the gravity of what we had done or not done, then we were in danger of being surprised by the judgment of God.

You will notice that those words no longer appear in any of our liturgies. For those compilers of our current 1979 Prayer Book took that to be excessive and not reflective of 20th century worshippers.

On the other end of the scale there seems to be in our time a general unrest with the Confession in our liturgy. For some they will say the Confession because even if they are not aware of doing something wrong, they feel that they need to just in case they missed something. For others the Confession seems somewhat antiquated. And they wonder why they should say bad things about themselves if they do not feel that way. For still others the Confession has a definite place in their liturgical life. But it is somewhat vague and undefined. In general there seem to be many contrasting points of view on the nature of sin and the sinner. There is a service of private confession in the Prayer Book. But it is hardly ever used.

All to say that there is not oneness in our perception of being tempted or presented with a choice. And I think in the current environment in the Church it is exceedingly hard to find a place to be in regard to sin. So we should be kind and understanding to each other in this time of questions and unrest. And we should remember, wherever we are on the scale, that the whole point of Jesus coming was because of God's love for us. Yes, the whole subject of sin and temptation is a very uncomfortable one for us. But in essence it is a quintessential Lenten dilemma. Pushed and pulled by different points of view, we are stretched among feeling good about ourselves to realizing truth about ourselves to being overcritical of ourselves to ignoring the whole thing, just to name a few.

Our struggle as a people with the meaning of temptation and sin is an uncomfortable but compelling Lenten task. To begin the task we need to ask ourselves, "How is it with me and God?" and "What is it that gets in the way of my love for God?" Once we ask those, we are on the way to answering the question of temptation for ourselves.

If we face facts, Lent is a hard time. Like Baptism the real value of Lent is in going through it. All of us are called into the difficulty of Lent, into the questions and confusion of Lent, into the discomfort of Lent. If we are willing to stay on the path, to wrestle with sin and temptation like Jesus did, on the other side we will find something new that made the journey worth it.

Do I want to wrestle with sin and temptation? Not particularly. But I have the feeling that if we turned away from Lent 2009 that we would encounter this struggle somewhere else.

As a church, if we covenant together to enter this time, this experience, then we are there to help each other and to bear each other up. My heart goes out to you and to me as we stand on the threshold of a task and a challenge. Let's go in.

May the unrest and the discomfort of Lent open us to anticipated truth and love. And may it open us to visions and knowledge of which we have never dreamed. Amen.