

Lent 1, 2/25/07

Luke 4:1-13

“Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return” These are powerful words – words that we hear on Ash Wednesday as we begin Lent and a cross of ash is made on our forehead. These are words that invite us into the wilderness of Lent – a time of self examination and repentance where we renew our relationship with God. The reception of ashes is a powerful experience for many people.

I remember my first Ash Wednesday at Epiphany and being fascinated by how many people came to receive ashes. At the noon service, this church is full. People who have missed the service, rush in afterwards, wanting ashes. People come throughout the day, asking for ashes. I wondered at this need for ashes. For many who come, this is one of their few connections with organized religion. I wonder why people who function day by day without the church suddenly on Ash Wednesday, feel this need for ashes? Is it superstition? Is it leftover childhood memories? Is it sentimental?

I paid close attention to the people who came for the ashes during the day and as I put ashes on their heads, I could see that this was not just a superstition or a whim. This was a holy moment for them, a sacred moment in the presence of God. The ashes on our forehead and the words saying that we are dust remind us of our mortality, and of our sinfulness. In making of the cross, we realize that God is present with us loving us in spite of it all. We are called back into the presence of God. I think we all long for the holy and whether we identify that longing with being spiritual or being religious, it is there. We long to be in the presence of the creator of all things, the power behind the universe. We long to be whole. We long to be unequivocally loved. We long for deeper relationship with God and yet we put it off. The world intervenes. Our work, our children, taxes, our commute, the daily grind and busyness of life – they are always there distracting us, wearing us out. And then Lent comes along inviting us to stop, to go into the wilderness, just as we are, into a deeper relationship with God. I think that is part of why the ashes are so attractive to so many.

The ashes are an invitation back into the presence of the holy - no matter where we are – no matter whether we are part of the church community or not. And we hear that invitation whether we hear it for a moment, several hours, forty days or more. We all long for that presence of the holy. In Lent, we once again have that opportunity to make ourselves vulnerable to being drawn into deeper relationship with God, to renew ourselves and our faith.

As one friend of mine says in her sermon about wilderness, “There is nothing like a good piece of wilderness to help you gain perspective. Wilderness can be a place of temptation, and wilderness is always a place of transformation. Wilderness removes

you from the daily grind. Wilderness breaks you down. Wilderness builds you up. You don't enter the wilderness for fun, but rather for growth, whether you like it or not, whether you asked for it or not...wilderness happens in our lives."ⁱ

The wilderness is a place of temptation and always a place of transformation. We have an opportunity to engage the God that loves us. Wilderness is about being away and being available for something else. In today's gospel, Jesus is led into the wilderness by the spirit for forty days and during these forty days he was tempted by the devil. This was his preparation for his ministry and a tough one it was. We don't get to hear much about the actual forty days – just what happens at the end. We know he ate nothing and one can imagine him in a desert with very little vegetation – scorching temperatures during the day and freezing temperatures in the night.

Perhaps Jesus had a small tent, perhaps he had some rocks for shelter, or a small tree. Maybe he had nothing at all. "Those who have visited the Holy Land know there are, even today, vast areas of wilderness in which one could easily get lost and die from thirst or hunger."ⁱⁱ Whatever it was, the wilderness was hard.

Why does Jesus go out in to the wilderness for forty days? Why does he face temptation? He is the Son of God. He has just come from the triumph of his baptism and God telling him that you are my beloved Son, with you I am well pleased."

Perhaps Jesus needs this time of reflection, time away, a time for him to understand who he is and whose he is. It is a time when he claims his identity, his purpose and God's will. In the wilderness Jesus encounters temptations. The devil tempts Jesus with food – He says things like, "Turn these stones into bread. You know that you can. It would be so easy." And Jesus says "One does not live by bread alone." The devil tempts Jesus with power. "You can have all these kingdoms, if you will worship me". Jesus says that it is written that one is to worship the Lord only and serve only him. Then the devil tempts Jesus to prove who is by throwing himself off the top of the temple and surviving the fall. Jesus claims who he is and says not to put the Lord your God to the test. Jesus does not need to turn stones to bread, or to worship the devil or to prove who he is. Jesus is the Lord our God and now he will go forth to his ministry.

This is how Jesus comes out of the wilderness – knowing who he is and ready to do his work in the world.

Lent is our God-given forty days for wilderness, whether we want it or not. Lent is our time, our call to remember who we are, and whose we are. We can choose not to go in to the wilderness, but then we miss the opportunity for that profound transformation in our relationship with God. The call to a holy Lent is about opening our heart to the presence of God and the movement of the Spirit so that we too can come to know our identity, our purpose and God's will for us. It is about getting away to that empty place – taking time away from the things in our lives or taking time for something in our lives that takes us to a place where we can pay attention to God, where we are vulnerable to God. . If you get a chance, read the call to a Holy Lent in the prayer book on page

264. The call is to self examination and repentance, to prayer fasting, and self denial, and to read and meditate on God's Holy Word. It is a call to us to renew our repentance and faith.

Whatever we do, whether it is giving up chocolate, fasting, starting a new prayer practice or reviving an old one, attending a Lenten series of classes, using public transportation for the environment, or turning off the TV, we do these things to bring us back in to relationship with God, to deepen our relationship with God, and to open up some empty space within us so that we can make that connection with the holy, the power that is beyond our mortal selves. When we open ourselves up to the holy, our transformation happens. God is there waiting for us in the wilderness. All we have to do is to step out into it. We may step out in a small way or it in a big way. It doesn't matter because God is waiting for whatever we step we are ready to take.

Let us go into the wilderness and see what is there for us. Let us see how our lives will be transformed. It is scary to step out, to step away from the worldly things we rely on, but God asks us let those things go. Let us answer God's invitation especially at this time that our community of faith sets aside for this process. Let us respond to that yearning we have for the holy wherever we are in our lives, whether we feel close to God or very far away or even if we are not sure what God is about. Let us open ourselves up to the dry and dusty winds of the wilderness where we can be vulnerable to the movement of God's Spirit and see what arises – see what transformation happens in our lives.

ⁱ R. Nyback, Sermon, Lent 1, YrC, St Cross by the Sea, Los Angeles, CA, 2/25/2007.

ⁱⁱ Worship that Works, http://www.episcopalchurch.org/sermons_that_work_82386_ENG_HTM.htm, The Rev. Ben Helmer., bhelmer1247@msn.com.