

*In the name of God, who makes us, loves us, and keeps us. Amen*

I wonder if you have noticed, as you have been out and about in the countryside these recent weeks, that the snow pack on the ground has made some things visible that are otherwise obscured. As you look into the woods, the features of the ground, which are in other seasons camouflaged by undergrowth, now stand out in a dazzling white. The trees and bushes now being bare of leaves and color, the ground between and below them can be seen, and in fact begs to be seen. While the true shape of the forest floor is at other times just a blur of subdued browns and greens, now its hills and slopes and ridges and ravines are revealed in pure white. What we might have guessed was there before, if we had bothered to pause and consider it, is in this season now curiously obvious and fascinating. It has occurred to me that this phenomenon is a bit like Lent itself: That which is otherwise, at most times, ignored or unnoticed in our daily lives, becomes instead something unusually experienced. Like the snow between the empty trees, Lent can point out the features of our grounding, of our foundation. And there, with stark contrasts, we can clearly see the ravines and slopes and relationships of our personal and spiritual landscape. And it is a fascinating sight.

Some of my clergy friends have commented that this entire year past has been one long and extended season of Lent; and I think there may be something to what they say. While our late deprivations have been imposed more than chosen, the lack of personal contact to which we have become accustomed is, indeed, a kind of 'fasting'. And even though we have had this pandemic thrust upon us externally, we have ourselves imposed the discipline of distancing and isolating. We have separated ourselves deliberately from one another for protection and longevity, when our more usual response would have been just the opposite: to huddle together and lean on one another in difficult and scary times. During this past year, we have fasted from so many 3-D encounters, from the presence of neighbors, and even family. And we have followed a discipline of caution and restraint. Deprived of the camouflaging blur of social engagements and vacations and holiday celebrations and road trips and even in-person church services, many have settled in to a life of reflection and study and self-examination, all disciplines we associate with Lenten practices. Like the snow at the base of our bear trees, much which was hidden has had the opportunity to be revealed. And despite the anxiety of this past year, it has, in many ways, been fascinating.

Not to mix metaphors too much, I have told you that observing Lent is a bit like looking in a mirror, or perhaps watching yourself in a screen during a zoom call. Even if you are tech-savvy enough to find and click the icon which switches off the 'mirror-image' on your digital device, you can't avoid seeing your image, your real image, unless you disconnect your camera presence altogether. Like the snow pack among the trees, the image we are able to see and consider is one of reality, not distorted by myth or adornment or even distraction. If we take the time to glance into the snowy woods, or into the mirror, that which is revealed is probably more true than what we expected. And what we can see, if our attention is drawn to it, is God's hand. God has initiated the process that has formed the features of the ground, and God has also begun the work which has formed the foundational features of our reflected images. The stark contrasts and deprivations of Lent can permit us to see God's dream more clearly. So, this extended Lent-like year, as we look back on it, has given us an unusual but fascinating opportunity to recognize the power of God's hand at work.

Jesus, as a young man, rises from the baptismal waters, and God's own voice gives him an important clue to his true identity: "You are my son, my beloved. With you I am well pleased." And then,

immediately, God's Spirit directs Jesus into the proverbial wilderness for self-examination, for the facing of temptations, for self-realization. Knowing something of the landscape of that region above the Jordan River, you can imagine that wilderness to be one of true deprivation and isolation. There wouldn't be any snow or trees, or mirrors, either. Only the howling threat of wild beasts, prowling around like a virus in the emptiness. Mark's Gospel tells us narratively that Satan, the prince of demons was there, too, attempting to deceive and seduce and distract Jesus from the Lenten work of self-realization. But in God's world, even in God's wilderness, Satan is not real. Evil is not part of God's foundation. The snow among the trees does not reveal a satanic reality; it reveals the ground upon which God's dream for this world is founded, even with its ravines and cliffs. Even in the wilderness, God's messenger angels are there to attend to Jesus and his foundational needs, and that is God's promise for us, too. Even in the experience of pandemic, God's beloved children are not abandoned. Fascinating, but true.

The church's 40 days of Lent are modeled after the 40 days Jesus spends in the wilderness before beginning his public ministries. Lent is meant to be a time of preparation, preparing ourselves for Easter Day and the resurrection and re-invigoration of our own ministries. It is meant to be used as a time for learning who we are and who we can become. Psalm 25, which we shared this morning, describes our need for learning, and God as the great guiding teacher. "Show me your ways, O Lord, and teach me your paths." The psalmist pleads, "Lead me in your truth and teach me." The God of Psalm 25 teaches sinners in the way, the lowly, too, and guides the humble in doing right. All this Lenten instruction, this finding the solid ground between us 'trees', the recognizing God's image in our own reflection, is meant to show us God's "way", God's "path" through the forest and across the wilderness, that we might be in right relationship with one another and in faithful covenant with God. Like the 40 days and 40 nights of rainy weather Noah and his family endured, all the weeks of deprivation, were finally greeted by a renewal of God's intent to be in covenant and partnership with humankind, and displayed as fascinating rainbow of color and light and promise.

Our current, so-called "Lenten" experience has been more like 40 weeks instead of 40 days, and yet our liturgical calendar says there are six more weeks until Easter Day. But we need not be like that famous groundhog who is scared back into a protective hovel by our own shadow. Our security is *not* in what is blurred by camouflage or ignorance, but can be found in the revelation of the grounding features around and among us, like the bright, snowy landscape between the trees. God's path is not hidden, it is only insufficiently explored. So, what of these last Lenten-like months? What have we learned that will be useful in our personal and parish ministries? What has been revealed to us? How might we faithfully change our ways, choosing God's paths instead. God is a great teacher. Speaking through the prophets and the Holy Scriptures and through God's own Beloved Son, the Holy Spirit has given us the resources we need to grasp a better way. Meanwhile, Bishop DeDe has announced that, provided the current trend of hospitalizations and vaccinations continue, we can begin using our church buildings again before Easter. Will that coincide with a renewed sense of ministry? Will our Lenten disciplines have helped prepare us? It will be fascinating to see.

As we offer our Prayers of the People in a few minutes, you may notice that I have written prayers for us which are based on the Decalogue, the Ten Commandments. (You may need to read a bit between the lines). I didn't go to that effort to show how clever I could be, but rather to help us take advantage of the foundational teachings of God's Word. The Ten Commandments are, of course, not the 'ten suggestions', but neither are they a mere instruction manual. They are important teachings, given lovingly by a loving teacher. For our own good. To help us thrive. To reveal the truth. To disclose the foundation. To see the shape of the ground amid the trees. To set us on the right path. To give us Lenten directions toward a fascinating Easter season of reinvigoration, of restoration, of Resurrection. Amen.