

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

Last month we heard in church the story of Jesus' preaching in his hometown, and the severe reaction his neighbors had to being told that there was nothing 'special' about them; that they were loved by God, but not loved any more than anyone else. They wanted to throw him off a cliff to his death! What was Jesus thinking?! How did he have the courage to proclaim such a controversial idea to the people of Nazareth? Today's story from the Gospel of Luke is a little flashback to what happened prior to that incident, and may help us to see how he came to make such a scene in his hometown synagogue. We go back a short time to Jesus' baptism in the Jordan River by his relative, John the Baptizer. Like many others, Jesus made the trip south to the Jordan and presented himself to be cleansed and forgiven. Baptism is a vow, a promise, and after making a vow to God it is customary, and helpful, to pray. We follow this pattern ourselves all the time in our liturgies. Well, you remember that while Jesus was praying after his baptismal promises, 'the heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form, as a dove, and a voice came from heaven, saying, "You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased."'

Thereafter, says the Gospel, Jesus was filled with the Holy Spirit, and on his return trip to Nazareth in Galilee, he is diverted by the Spirit and led into the wilderness for nearly six weeks. Was he somehow equipped for those forty days of isolation and deprivation? Had he brought enough provisions for such a diversion? Did he have a heavy cloak to protect him from the chill of night? Did he have a filled canteen to support him in the arid wasteland of central Palestine? Did he have a weapon with which to hunt or to ward off hungry wild beasts? It appears not, since we are told that after those days alone, he was famished. Was the Spirit testing his endurance? Was the Spirit testing the integrity of his baptismal intentions? Did Jesus even know that it would only last for forty days? Was it here, in this crucible of heat and chill, of hunger and thirst, of aimless wandering, that the formula for Jesus' ministry as the Son of God and Son of man was worked-out?

Last week we heard the story of the transfiguration, when three of Jesus' disciples witnessed a glorious aura around him as he stood on a hilltop speaking with Moses and Elijah in a baffling vision. These two great heroes of Jesus' own faith also had had their forty days and nights of isolation and confrontation. Moses, in order to receive the gift of the law, including the Ten Commandments, spent forty days at the summit of Mt. Horeb, on more than one occasion, in the alarming presence of God. He, too, had gone without food or drink, or human companionship, for the duration of these visits. And Elijah, called by the Lord to prophecy, endured forty days of fasting on the trail to Horeb himself. An angel of the Lord had insisted that he nourish himself with water and a cake before he set out, but beyond that, he was unprepared for the trip. Elijah, fearing reprisals for killing Jezebel's false prophets, had left his servant behind and journeyed alone and afraid in the wilderness. To his wonder, the Lord protected him on his way. Moses and Elijah, Jesus' confidants at the transfiguration, knew what the wilderness is, and had both endured it with tenacity and resolve.

And so, filled with the Spirit for his nourishment, Jesus sets off into the barren wilderness to confront his own challenges. But to say he was unprepared and ill-equipped, would be to overlook the clues that the Gospel of Luke has planted for us. During his thirty-or-so years prior to his baptism, Jesus has been in the frequent company of his mother Mary, who knew of his promised majesty and might likely have told him the stories of the Angel Gabriel who foretold that Jesus would be the Son of the Most High, and of her kinswoman Elizabeth, John's mother, who asked 'Who am I, that the mother of my Lord should visit me?', and of old Simeon, who, having glimpsed the infant Jesus in the temple, said 'These eyes of mine have seen the Savior, whom you have prepared for all the world to see; a Light to enlighten the nations and the glory of your people Israel.' And what of that day, for example, when the boy Jesus secretly remained behind in Jerusalem while Mary and Joseph departed in their caravan for home? Returning to look for their missing twelve-year-old, they found him with the religious teachers, who were amazed at his understanding. Finally, at the end of Chapter two, Luke cryptically writes that Jesus grew, in wisdom, and in stature, and in favor with God and his neighbors. As Jesus walked into the wilderness that day after his baptism, he was already equipped with a habit of faithfulness and a healthy soul, the means to endure and the will to do so.

And Jesus had a command of the Hebrew Scriptures, too. Notice that when the devil tempts him to turn solid rock into a loaf of bread when he is physically famished, he applies a quote from Moses himself: 'One does not live by bread alone.' Moses went on to say, that one lives by everything which comes from the mouth of God, that is, by God's saving Word. Jesus knows this passage by heart, and, by heart, he knows its meaning. Moses had said this to the

Hebrews who were spending their own hungry time in the wilderness after being delivered from slavery in Egypt, and by using these same words, Jesus proclaims his own kinship with those ancient ancestors and the lessons of faith they learned during *their* journey. Jesus is equipped for his trials with the power of scripture. Power enough, even to put the devil in his place. When tempted by the chance to rule all the kingdoms of the world in trade for worshipping the devil, he again quotes from the Book of Deuteronomy, 'Worship the Lord your God, and worship only him.' Apparently impressed by Jesus' knowledge of the Bible, the devil tries to use verses from Psalm 91, which we heard this morning, to deceive and persuade him. But Jesus sees through the ruse, and counters with a quote of his own from Moses: 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test'. Like his ancestors who had carried the broken tablets of the Decalogue in an ark before them into battle, Jesus carries the precious gift of the law, those sacred teachings, spiritually into the wilderness, and with it he is well-equipped for discernment and resolution.

Our own church season of Lent is modeled after the forty days Jesus spent in the Judean wilderness. Many enhance their experience by fasting or by depriving themselves of luxuries. Lent has a reputation for being an austere, discreet time, a season when the revelry of parties is avoided, and even weddings are postponed, in favor of personal and corporate confession, and the asking of forgiveness. It displays the desolation of the wilderness and the stamina which one needs to endure such times, whether during these particular forty days or not. I expect that we each have experienced our own times in a wilderness, times of deep doubt, exasperating trials, paralyzing confusion, or times which accentuate our own lack of control over life: sickness, misfortune, loss, separation from loved ones by distance or death. While we are sorely tempted at *other* times to distract ourselves, or kid ourselves, or lull ourselves into contentment, Lent is a time to face and engage the truth. By his light and his life, Jesus has revealed the fundamental truths of creation, sin, judgement, and redemption; in Lent we consider the meaning of each in our lives, not once forgetting the most fundamental truth: God deeply loves each and every one of us, without partiality, without favorites. That truth was known by Jesus, but his neighbors in Nazareth found it scandalous.

But while Lent is a season of penitence and reflection, it is also a time of preparation. Like Jesus, we are called to ministry. And an uncluttered season, during which we may intentionally attend to our formation, is certainly helpful. And it may be a fair and useful question to ask how we are equipped to meet the challenges of such a season. Are we filled with the Spirit like Jesus? Are we nourished by gifts from God, like Elijah? Do we have the courage to climb the frightful mountain like Moses? We are, in part, equipped for the wilderness by our scriptures. These Bible stories we hear week after week somehow never become stale, for at a deeper level they provoke us to think about ourselves and our relationship with God. Their narratives give us images and metaphors of our own lives; they hold up a mirror to our lives which are constantly unfolding and re-organizing in our perception. They remain always as new and fresh as our understanding of ourselves and our ministries is new and fresh. Like Jesus, who draws on scriptural heritage to confront the devil, so we, too, draw from the framework and values of God's word, thanks be to God. We dust off the old Ten Commandments, and with the truthfulness of Lent, use their framework to look into our progress as pilgrims

And thanks be to God that our times of preparation are also empowered by the gifts of faith, hope, and love; our journey through these forty days would be empty without them. Faith brings us courage for the facing of these days. Hope, which for Christians is less a 'longing' and more a 'certain expectation', gives us the strength of a positive attitude. And love is, well, God. We can rest assured, even in the dark wilderness, that we are equipped with all three. For this parish, this community of faith, hope, and love, supports and nourishes us in Christ's name. It is an 'outfitter' which provides what we need for our mission. Even if we intend an individual and private Lent, a time of isolation like Jesus, we still need each other during Lent: for encouragement, prayer support, forgiveness, consolation, and all the things which our parish family does so well. Our life together brings us joy even during seasons of sadness, peace in times of anxiety, and warmth even in the chill of discouragement. The banquet God has provided for us is truly sacramental. Our ministry is to share its joy. And a Holy Lent is meant to cleanse us and prepare us to be our best selves in this holy work.

Loving God, by your grace you gathered us from many walks of life to become a loving family at St. John's. Help us sustain the miraculous love within this parish and guide us in sharing this love with our neighbors. All this we ask through our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Amen.