

First Sunday in Lent—Year C

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St. Mark's Episcopal Church | Milwaukee, WI

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Every year, when we worship on the first Sunday of the season of Lent, the Gospel story appointed has something to do with the testing of Jesus. The people in charge of choosing our readings mix it up a little bit—some years, we hear from Matthew, for instance—but variations aside, if it's the first Sunday of Lent, we're going to hear about Jesus, 40 days, testing and the wilderness. And I get it. As a church, we talk about walking these 40 days together—about preparing for Jesus, about testing. I understand that our Lenten practices flow nicely from this story.

But, because we hear this story at the same time, year after year, on this reading, I found it a little boring. I've heard it over and over, year after year; it's lost some of its shock value. I know on the first Sunday of Lent that Jesus will be offered all the kingdoms of the world by the devil, and I know he will refuse. Good for Him. That is precisely what I would expect from Jesus, just as it is precisely what I would expect from the devil. I don't know that we're breaking any new narrative ground here.

Never let it be said that God can't inspire even when the preacher is short on ideas. Earlier this week, as my enthusiasm for this story was about to reach a new low, I noticed a little something I had never seen before. I remember the devil quoting scripture to Jesus, and I remember Jesus quoting it right back—kind of winning their debate. And I remember Jesus being taken up to the top of the Temple in Jerusalem and being offered the world. This stuff I remembered. But what I noticed at this year's reading which I had never really noticed before is that all of this testing, all of this time in the wilderness happened right after Jesus was baptized.

Wait a minute. I thought Baptism was a good thing? We find the new babies in our congregation, dress them up in grandma's white baptismal robe, give them a bath, say some prayers and then remind them that they are now God's own children forever. What on earth does Baptism have to do with wandering around the desert for 40 days?

I think it is a matter of inheritance. When we take that little baby, fresh from the font, we are saying publicly that she now belongs to a family this is with God forever. And that she has the rights and privileges that belonging to this family brings. This Baptized little baby has the power to preach salvation, call on God's love and mercy and to be a full member of the Body of Christ—a disciple of Jesus. These are the things we inherit at Baptism.

So here is where I am a little confused; in today's story, the inheritance of Baptism doesn't seem to be all the good things that we normally associate with that rite. Instead, directly after Baptism, Jesus goes away to struggle with the harmful forces of this world. His inheritance seems to be struggle.

And maybe, as a room full of spiritually mature people, we can take an honest look at our Baptism and our call this first Sunday of Lent.

Perhaps it is not all oil and candles and silver spoons. Maybe our Baptism will bring us into direct confrontation with the powers of the world that try to kill and destroy the creatures of God. Maybe our Baptism is a little dangerous, and we, as members of the Body of Christ, will find ourselves in situations of testing. I know how Jesus acts in this story. He is Jesus. But I wonder how I will act in this story, how you will act in this story.

Now, it's been many years since my Baptism—and I imagine it has been quite a few for you as well—but what would happen to us if we were taken, right now, to the top of the US Bank Center and shown the entire city of Milwaukee. What if we were told that this whole city—and in fact all the cities of the world—could be ours if we could just reject our God? That is quite a test, and I'm not always sure what the result would be. How might I answer?

I suppose what I noticed on this reading of the story is the link between Baptism and then an immediate move into the wilderness—the hard places of testing and bleakness where we, as Christians, will sometimes find ourselves.

Lent, seen in this light, is our opportunity to think through some of these hard questions. How will we act, as Christian people, when we are tested with the hard realities of the world? How will we comport ourselves, as Baptized members of the Body of Christ? How will our Baptism affect how we interact with the wilderness?

Last week, Michelle talked about the unlikelihood of Lent being endorsed by a contemporary Public Relations firm. That's a point very well taken. And I think it extends to the entire Christian life. Forty days of temptation and struggle with the powers of the world is a tough sell. But even when we are pitted against the worst the world can do, we have strength from the story of Jesus, from the bread and the wine, and from the sure knowledge that we are marked always as Christ's own no matter what the world has to say about it. Amen.