

First Sunday in Lent, Year B  
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The journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step. Life is the journey, not the destination. Not all who wander are lost. These are just some of the many ways that our culture attempts to connect the years between the cradle and the grave to the idea of a journey, a voyage. The similarity between life and a journey has been remarked on so many times that at some point, the metaphor loses its meaning, its power. And yet, I don't hear a whole lot of other metaphors coming to replace it. Forrest Gump famously said that life is like a box of chocolates, but other than that, I don't notice many images or metaphors arising to help us explain what this life we've lucky enough to lead actually IS.

So it is too, I think, with Lent. Lent, I am not the first to remark, is a journey. A forty day wandering in the wilderness. A walk with Jesus through his teaching in Judah. An accompaniment along the sorrowful road that Jesus walks on his way to the cross. Lent, they say, is a journey.

The church emphasizes this theme. The Jesus story for today is the very beginning of Jesus' ministry in the gospel of Mark — the idea being that we will begin today, the first Sunday in Lent, at the beginning of Jesus' ministry and end it on Good Friday at the end of the book. The whole thing fits very neatly together, which is probably why billions of Christians throughout history have understood Lent as a journey — a walk with Jesus, a perambulation into the mysteries of faith.

Maybe it's because we can't go anywhere at the moment, or maybe it's just because after 40 or so Lents I need something fresh, I wondered if Lent this year for me isn't as much a journey but is instead a rehearsal. A rehearsal for what, you might ask? Let me explain.

Earlier this week, I read an article in a right-leaning magazine lamenting what it understood to be the unseemly public criticism of a prominent AM political radio personality after his death from lung cancer. I was really torn because I have found this radio personality a loathsome voice in modern life, and at the same time, as someone who presides at funerals pretty regularly, I know that grief is grief is grief. The article I read suggested that the reason we do not speak ill of the dead doesn't have anything to do with the accomplishments, notorious or otherwise, of those who have died. Instead, we do not speak ill of the dead because of our intuitive understanding of the ubiquity of death itself. It will come to us all — the powerful, the weak, the poor, the rich, the clever, the stupid. It does not matter. Death will meet us all quietly at the end.

And, in almost no place in our society, are we allowed to acknowledge that. Except, maybe, in the ancient rituals of Lent. Lent, thought about in this way, is a rehearsal for death. Remember, my beloved people, that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.

For forty days, we are going to look at those things we'd rather keep hidden: pain, suffering, sin, death, and the devil. The stories in the gospels will be of Jesus and temptation; of plagues in

Egypt, of dry wilderness scenes. And they will be a reminder of one of the foundational truths of our faith — that our God became flesh to experience, not just the happy and the exciting parts of life, but also the suffering, the injustice, and indeed, death.

You might ask, is this really the year to emphasize the difficult parts of life? We are, after all, in our second year of a global pandemic. And, I say that yes. It is still an appropriate time to look death in the face. If anything, it's just a little easier this year since it is all around us. Perhaps Lent will help us look at those death tolls from COVID and really pay attention to what that means. That each number represented there is a beloved child of God, and that the Jesus that we follow weeps at the loss of man, woman, and child. Perhaps Lent will help us see the suffering of our friends in Texas and it will feel real, because every cold little child or person without water is important to our God.

So, let us get ourselves prepared for this season. We are going to look at some of the more difficult parts of the human experience as we make our way through these forty days. Hopefully, we will learn and grow. And hopefully we will feel the presence of Jesus, just off stage right, as we rehearse. Maybe He will give us a line or two if we forget.

Practice Lent with me, St. Mark's. And let us bravely uncover the hidden things of our faith. Amen.