

## Living By God's Authority

### I. A Lenten Invitation

- A. Wednesday night we opened the Season of Lent with a beautiful service of ritual and music for Ash Wednesday.
1. *Bp. Mary* was with us to dedicate the new Stations of the Cross created for us by local sculptor, *Chloe White*.
    - a. The choir gave a wonderful performance of Mendelssohn's, "*Hear My Prayer*."
  2. I have the impression that Ash Wednesday is becoming better known to many recently with the ritual of the 'imposition of ashes.'
    - a. Sacramental churches might call this an "*outward sign of an inward and invisible grace*."
  3. In our church, the Prayer Book liturgy passes to us an ancient tradition for Ash Wednesday with a solemn invitation, said by the Presider:
    - a. "*I invite you, in the name of the Church, to the observance of a holy Lent, \ by self-examination and repentance; \ by prayer, \ fasting, \ and self-denial; \ and by reading and meditating on God's holy Word.*"
    - b. These words may sound extreme to many in our '*feel good*' kind of culture today. But they are not an invitation to do something unusual or extreme or to leave daily life behind.
    - c. Rather the invitation is first to recognize and consider and then possibly to practice in some way the classic spiritual disciplines taught by the church from its beginning.
      - (1. These are commended to us as some of the most tried and true ways of noticing God right where we are.
      - (2. They aren't the only ways toward that goal but they are among the more reliable for training our eyes to see what is already before us.
      - (3. So each year as we begin the Lenten season the church asks us to use them. ///

- B. Today, the First Sunday of Lent we hear of Jesus going into the wilderness east of the Jordan immediately after his baptism. The Gospels tell us how he fasted and prayed for 40 days, and at the end he was tempted by the devil. ///
1. All through the scriptures, especially in the OT, the wilderness plays an important role.
    - a. It is the place of exile and refuge,\ the region for purification,\ the location of testing and faith,\ and finally, foremost, the setting for an encounter with God.
    - b. In the wilderness, human achievement is meaningless and in the utter barrenness,\ in the seeming absence,\ God is there.
    - c. In the wilderness, nothing but honesty will suffice. //
      - (1. Self-serving deceptions cannot stand for long in the blaze of honesty that prevails in the wilderness.
    - d. In the wilderness, the only hope is to rely solely on God's mercy and providence. ////
  2. John the Baptist and Jesus knew the power of the wilderness for the renewal of faith and encounter with God.
    - a. John called the people of the city to the wilderness to purify Israel from their collaboration with the Empire / and to revive their faith in the God of the liberated slaves.
    - b. Jesus also withdraws to the wilderness. We are told of his reliance on the power of God to face the temptations of Satan. ///
  3. In the early centuries of Christianity when the temporal power of the Empire was becoming so prominent in the Church -- 10's of thousands of Christian men and women found their way into the barren regions of Egypt and Syria.
    - a. Leaving behind the cities and great basilicas they sought God in the solitude of the desert. ---
    - b. But even in the cities, Jesus' struggle in the wilderness could not be forgotten.
      - (1. Rather than withdrawing to a place,-- a time for withdrawal was established in the Christian year.
      - (2. The 40 days prior to the Day of Resurrection were set aside as a time of special preparation for those who would be baptized at the Easter vigil.
      - (3. Others marked these days with them and near the close of the 4<sup>th</sup> Century the Season of Lent was established.
      - (4. 40 days of withdrawal,\ reminiscent of the wilderness periods in the life of God's people -- a temporal wilderness set up to encourage that encounter with God.

## II. The Lenten Fast

- A. For modern people the Lenten fast is something a bit strange.
1. In a culture of material wealth our instinctive quest is to satisfy every desire.
  2. Why would Jesus choose not to eat when he could?
    - a. Why would he refuse to turn rocks into bread?
  3. Jesus had an intuitive knowledge that if you satisfy every earthly whim,
    - a. your deeper craving for God gets caked over with dust;
    - b. it grows numb and you forget that your deepest hunger is not for bread alone,
    - (1. *"but for every word that proceeds from the mouth of God"* in the words of Deut. 8:3.
  4. The well known preacher, Barbara Brown Taylor writes that the hollowness we sometimes feel in ourselves is not a sign of something gone wrong.
    - a. Our inner soul is the holy of holies within us, the uncluttered throne room of our Lord God.
    - b. Nothing on earth can fill it, -- but that does not stop us from trying.
    - c. Whenever we start feeling too empty inside, like a new born infant we grab our pacifiers and suck for all we're worth.
    - d. Pacifiers, whatever kind they are, do not nourish us but at least they plug the hole. //
    - e. To enter the wilderness is to leave these behind. -----  
[Barbara Brown Taylor, Home By Another Way, 1999, p. 67]
- B. Christians have chosen various forms of renunciation, --simplifying our lives,\ or making periodic fasts,\ or maybe just giving up something small. –
1. The practice is not to make us miserable -- but to discover our hunger for God and our dependence on God.
    - a. We are invited to make this sojourn to give up what may be artificial about our lives; -- our dishonesties.
    - b. The point is to become honest with ourselves and most of all with God.
      - (1. As we encounter our deeper self, we confront our fears.
      - (2. What is going on when we crave something? Maybe we are hungry, or lonely.
      - (3. Instead of trying to fix the feeling, sit with it and see what you find out.
      - (4. You will discover in your deeper self that you actually have a choice about these fears; they need not rule you.

- c. When we go into the wilderness remember the most frequent command in the whole Bible, *“Fear not.”*
  - (1. Hearing these words, *“Do not be afraid”* makes a space in us where God’s love can have a dwelling.
- d. In the wilderness the force of faith going all the way back to Abraham comes through.
  - (1. God will provide and that is all we really need.

### III. Jesus Defeats Temptation

- A. At the end of his 40 days of fast, Luke tells us that Jesus was famished and the devil came to him.
  - 1. The three temptations are all to pride – the arch sin:
    - a. All are temptations to show what one can do by and for oneself up to the personal seizure of power that is beyond oneself.
    - b. The devil challenged Jesus: *“If you are the son of God, do something startling.*
      - (1. *Be different from others.*
      - (2. *Make these stones bread.*
      - (3. *Test your powers.*
      - (4. *Fling yourself from the pinnacle of the temple.*
      - (5. *Seize the authority you feel capable of!”* ///
  - 2. All through the Gospels Christ’s incarnate life teaches us about humility – even in this highest, greatest, most God-pervaded life.
    - a. But we see this most revealed in the temptations.
  - 3. The triumph of Jesus was his refusal of all temptation to take the path of his own power.
    - a. We see his unwavering dependency upon God alone.
    - b. He chooses deliberately the ordinary ways of meekness – receiving God’s sustenance in prayer,\ then allowing that to flow out of him, meekly giving in simplicity. //
  - 4. Consider that world dominion were possible.
    - a. But Jesus refuses rule over the earth.
    - b. In the words of St. Paul, *“He did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant”* (Phil. 2:6).
- B. For all of us, the more we have,\ the more stuff we accumulate,\ the more personal clout we wield,\ the larger our egos, the graver our spiritual danger will be.
  - 1. We call Jesus *Lord* for the authority he wields.
    - a. Yet he exercises that lordship not by possessing,\ but by emptying himself,

- b. not by heavy handed controlling, but by leaving creation to be itself, vulnerable. ///

C. Luke adds to this story that the “*devil departed from him until an opportune time.*”

1. At the outset of this story we’re told there will be other testing to come.
  - a. But Jesus’ ministry can now begin.
2. Jesus calls you and me to repent and be faithful, to follow in the way he shows us in his own focused obedience.
  - a. May we in his company also be armed for the hour of testing.