

The Rev. Dr. Hilary B. Smith

Holy Comforter

Richmond, VA

February 14, 2016; the 1st Sunday in Lent

Readings: Deuteronomy 26:1-11; Psalm 91:1-2, 9-16; Romans 10:8b-13; Luke 4:1-13.

The Lenten Wilderness

Welcome to Lent.

On Ash Wednesday we, this church, the Church world-wide, we began our Lenten journey.

There is great promise in this journey...though it is not the norm for us to choose a wilderness time.

Lent is characterized by putting away flowers and alleluias.

We veil the crosses not to make them pretty, but to hide the symbol of resurrection.

Why would we choose this wilderness time?

Jesus seemed to need that time, as it was the Spirit that led him into a place of struggle.

Why did Jesus need it?

For us, it is not a wilderness time for the sake of wilderness, but so that we might connect with Christ, who also knew the trials and temptations, frustrations and challenges of wilderness.

It is not wilderness time for wilderness sake, but so that might grow in our relationship with God---just as Jesus did.

As Luke tells the story, immediately following Jesus' baptism, a great moment of connection with God and the showing forth of God's power in the world, right after that high time...Jesus is led by the Spirit into the wilderness...not by the devil...but by the Spirit.

That the Spirit led Jesus into the wilderness makes one think that this wilderness time was a necessary time to prepare Jesus for his

ministry.

The testing done by the devil during those forty days was designed to do one thing...get Jesus to choose personal control over trusting God...or turning to God.

Control...we all want it...and many times we do have it, through the advantages many of us have...financial...educational...living in the United States....

The Spirit may lead us into wilderness times or at the least invite us into wilderness times so that we can learn to loosen our grip.

For when we loosen our grip on things, God is able to take our hand.

Jesus is tempted by the Devil, but these temptations do not seem bad, or in conflict with the ways of God---wouldn't it be great to be able to make bread from stones, to feed all the hungry---wouldn't it be great to have the power to make peace in the world---wouldn't be great to show everyone that you, Jesus, are God's Chosen One?

What tempted Jesus and what tempts us, for the most part, is not all bad...that is what makes it hard to refuse.

The Devil can even quote scripture, we hear from this story.

St. Ignatius was known to have said, for those who are seeking to follow the way of Jesus, "The devil comes cloaked as an angel of light."

Jesus chooses God, his Father, his Divine Parent, his Mother in heaven, over all of these temptations.

Before starting his public ministry, in the wilderness place, Jesus learns about what will tempt him...Jesus learns about himself and God, and to recognize the Devil...it is ok if you don't believe in an actual devil...a way to personify evil...it might be more helpful for us to think of being able to recognize what distracts us from God, causes us to turn away from God.

We walk with Jesus.

We walk the way of Jesus during Lent and through Holy Week, as we

prepare for Easter

As Episcopalians, we like to tell the stories of God and en flesh them, live the stories...we do this in our daily lives, and during church, through our religious rites.

Those days of Holy Week, will add meaning and energy to your Lenten journey...for this Lent and in the years to come.

Mark those services on your calendar now, so that you will have them as part of your Lenten practice this year, March 20 through March 26th. Especially Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, the Great Vigil of Easter on Saturday---these are special days, but are often not observed by many in our church or in any church.

I mentioned on Ash Wednesday that we don't often talk about days of "holy obligation" anymore, because we don't like to say anyone is obligated to anything related to the church; we would much rather encourage by making church appealing.

But it occurs to me that I ought to at least let you know that it is part of our Episcopal tradition to come to church on those days...to give you enough notice so that it might be possible for you.

And I do believe that observing Holy Week will enhance your Lenten experience and your experience of Easter.

Some years, I feel that Lent has arrived just in time because I've already been in a wilderness...and now the church is reflecting what I am feeling.

Does Lent ever strike you that way?

Like it is almost a relief to have the focus bring us to a place, an open place, less full of things so that we can look for what really matters?

This year the start of Lent, with its wilderness theme, is tracking well with some wilderness that we enter this day as a community.

For we say goodbye today to Martha, who after over 25 years of faithful, creative, inspired ministry here with us as our Director of Music, concludes her ministry with us so that she can be faithful in

answering a new call from God...there is more than a little wilderness to go around today.

And yet, and yet, Sunday is always a day of resurrection, in fact the 40 days of Lent do not include the Sundays.

This is so much a Lenten Sunday though...there will be tears but also cheers of thanks for all that Martha has shared with us, given us, in how she has formed us as community of faith.

Wilderness, but also resurrection in this day for us, for Martha's joy in music and in community, kept this church together during some dark wilderness times over the years.

As Mary Thorpe shared on Facebook last night, "She brightens every place she goes with her spirit and her music."

It is impossible to look at this situation of 25 years of service, of relationships, and not see resurrection...even through our tears.

This is the 1st Sunday in Lent for sure.

We enter this wilderness time with Jesus, who will show us the way...the way through the wilderness to new life.

So much in life convinces us that we are the masters of our existence, our realities...choosing to enter into Lent is one way to acknowledge that we need God...to remind ourselves that God is the only one who can sustain our lives and give us the grace we need to live.

We need Lent to give us permission in our world of consumption and information gathering...we need Lent's permission, less of a demand and more of an invitation, to make some space...space in time, space in place, space in thought, to focus on God and thereby to connect with ourselves more fully and what really matters.

Christians have always needed a special time for such a shift of focus, but perhaps we need it even more now.

An interesting book was published in 2014 entitled *The End of Absence*:

*Reclaiming What We've Lost In A World of Constant Connection.*¹

In this book, Michael Harris describes the intense world of connection made possible by the internet...that it can shape so much of our lives, perhaps even reshaping the structure of our brains. He makes the point that we are the last people, those of us who were born before 1985, to know what life was like before the internet, and that it might be worth considering this momentous change in culture and communication and being.

Perhaps going into the wilderness for us might involved turning off a screen...at least some of the time.

Some take a Lenten break from social media.

Maybe the whole idea of a Lenten wilderness can mean even more to us who live in a state of constant connection.

Lent came into being to help the faithful prepare for Easter...and that continues to be the primary reason for this season.

Lent is not an end in itself, but a path to a closer and deeper relationship with God.

As we hear in the Ash Wednesday service:

“The first Christians observed with great devotion the days of our Lord's passion and resurrection, and it became the custom of the Church to prepare for them by a season of penitence and fasting.”

We are invited by 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.”

Often we think of or we hear of people “giving something up for Lent.” But a good Lenten practice is whatever helps you grow closer to God, and as I preached on Ash Wednesday, this is not a self-indulgent, self-absorbed practice.

But rather, our personal spiritual growth frees us to be more present to

¹ Michael Harris, *The End of Absence: Reclaiming What We've Lost In A World of Constant Connection*, New York: Penguin Group, 2014.

others and to the needs of our communities, our world.

Perhaps for some of us, a good Lenten spiritual practice that can meet us on the ground in our daily reality could be to think and pray about why we are sad Martha is leaving...not just for the sake of being sad, although grieving is entirely appropriate in this situation--- but what it is we have valued about her ministry with us?

We might ask, “what have we learned about God through Martha’s leadership and gifts shared with us?”

Gifts we do get to keep.

We might ask, “What have I learned about myself?”

We might ask, “How can I continue to honor the gifts Martha has given me/us?”

“How do I want to share these gifts with others?”

Lenten practices can be very personal...tailor made by God for each one of us.

Let us pray:

God Most High, thank you for signs of your power and grace, shown to us even in the wilderness. Give us courage to stand firm in your Word in every time of trial and testing, that we may enter the land of your freedom and receive the salvation you so generously give; through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*²

² Kimberly Bracken Long, editor, *Feasting on the Word Worship Companion, Liturgies For Year C, Vol. 1, Advent Through Pentecost*, Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2012, Epub, p. 103.