

May God's word only be spoken and heard here, in the name of the Father, and the Son and the Holy Spirit. AMEN.

We are in a very different place in the world on this first Sunday of Lent than we were last year. The economy shrank in the last quarter beyond the economists' worst expectations. The government – I guess you and me – is about to own nearly 40% of our major banks. Foreclosures of homes abound. Unemployment continues to rise; some of us have lost jobs. An internet poll I found this week indicated that only 18% of those who responded think their job is secure. People are anxious, trying desperately to muster up some optimism, hanging on to the threads of hope they held after the election in November and on Inauguration day. And we come to church hoping for some good news; instead we get a Gospel today about Jesus being driven into the wilderness. Many of us can identify with his wilderness, feeling in a similar place ourselves.

On this first Sunday of Lent, if we're looking for something upbeat, it's not in today's lessons. We hear the stories of Noah and family having survived the Flood after 40 days (we don't read what havoc the waters caused) and Jesus being driven into the wilderness after his baptism, spending 40 days there. Neither sounds very hopeful. But here we are.

You may recall that in Matthew's and Luke's Gospels, Jesus is met by "the tempter" or "Satan", and the temptations are spelled out. Here, in Mark, it's just "wild beasts." "Just." *Just* is an understatement. Wilderness. Wild beasts. Hello? Does it sound a bit like our own lives?

For people who lived in the time of Jesus, in that part of the world, huddled behind walls in their cities, you can imagine what "wilderness" signified for them, what these "wild beasts" meant – those forces arrayed against civilization, against goodness and peace, against the humane. The "wild beasts" are the shadow side of reality, that deep, dark world of chaotic evil that bubble up from time to time and challenge us. And each of us has our own wild beasts, those forces, temptations in our lives that haunt and harass and often hurt us. Those wild beasts that isolate and separate us from one another, making us feel lost and alienated and in the wilderness. Wild beasts that we try and keep down, keep away.

The Lenten season is in part about acknowledging the wild beasts in our lives. In his homily on Ash Wednesday John noted that a young person had asked him what he was giving up for Lent. He acknowledged that he knew, even as he told her that he was going to fail in his efforts. And yet he also knew, that even as he failed, he was forgiven.

We are forgiven because Jesus has gone before us into the wilderness, faced those wild beasts, and been attended to by the angels. We are forgiven because Jesus has gone to the Cross and risen from the dead, for us.

Jesus will show us, in the rest of Mark's Gospel, his complete solidarity with us in our suffering, sickness, and pain. Today he demonstrates his shoulder-to-shoulder closeness with us in our temptations. Jesus defeats the tempting beasts. He heads back out of the wilderness, victor. He knew that the divine presence of his father, the assistance of the angels, was with him. And I think that's important for us to realize during Lent and all the days of the year. We are not alone in this desert. Christ is with us. And the angels are always there to minister to us.

Let me make this clear: God loves us more than we can say. God, who created each of us and holds each of us in the palm of his hand, who calls each of us God's beloved child, and loves each as if there was only one of us, whose unfailing love includes death on the cross, has also created us with the freedom to make choices in our lives. And sometimes our choices get us into trouble. Sometimes we make wrong choices. Interestingly, Martin

Luther, not one to look on the positive side of human nature, believed that the chief temptation of the devil is to try to convince us that we do not have a gracious God.

Barbara Brown Taylor, Episcopal priest and faculty member at Piedmont College in GA writes, *"We really are free to make disastrous decisions,"* she writes. *"Our choices do have consequences. And there really are some flaws in the whole setup, whether they come in the form of talking snakes or in the form of this almost biological urge we have to choose things that we know are ruinous for us and for the whole creation."*¹

And yet even with wrong choices, I don't believe that penitence is the only or even the central focus of Lent or of life. Nor is Lent about trying to prove that we can maintain whatever Lenten disciplines we've chosen for ourselves. Because then we're relying on our own strength, which of course leads us to pride. It is not forty days set aside to prove how good we can be. I think it is about meeting God. And I think that you and I come here because we want to try to meet God, to find God and be found by God, wherever we are. To really believe that we are God's beloved child. To hear the words that God loves us. Because, as the book title we have chosen for our Wednesday evening Lenten study is reads, *Always We Begin Again*. Our quest is on-going. To borrow from Jeremiah, it is renewed every morning.²

So what are we to do this Lent? These are some ideas. This Lent, be generous with your time – the time you give to meet God and let God meet you where you are – both here in community, in worship, and in the private of your room or your car. Be generous with your time with those you love. Make time for your spouse, your significant other, your children, your parents, your friends, where the temptation is to work more or sit in front of the computer. Be generous with time for yourself to rest a little more, read a little more, pray a little more, laugh a little more.

Be generous with your affection. Speak gently and kindly *of* and *to* others – especially those persons who present a real challenge. And be gentle with yourself – especially in the face of your frailty and your imperfections. Be generous with your money in allowing God's work to be done in the world – both in supporting the mission of the church and other ways in which you might make that happen. Remember that even in these disastrous financial times we are better off than most of the rest of the world.

Be generous with the gift of forgiveness. Let go of past hurts and forgive freely those who have disappointed or offended you. But forgive yourself as generously.

Each of us is called to move to an ever deeper understanding of God in our lives and in this community. The journey will be different for each of us. The road will be dusty and sometimes bumpy. However, the promise at the end of the journey never changes: we are all to be nourished by a vision of the glory of the risen Christ. Lent has begun. Now you and I are on a mission together to find and savor and give thanks for the joy in our life.

Thanks be to God. AMEN.

¹ *Speaking of Sin*, P. 47.

² Jeremiah 3:22-23.