

The Wilderness of Lent
The Rev. Jeffrey Clawson

March 1, 2009

Wednesday we entered Lent. The young people in the confirmation class led us in the Rite of Ashes. But what does entering Lent mean?

A friend has been announcing to everyone that she has given up vegetables for Lent. I reminded her when she tried this on me that:

- A. I'm a priest, and
- B. That she told me years ago that as a child she gave up vegetables for the rest of her life. Nice try.

Entering Lent means we enter a season of special commitment in the spiritual battle to oppose the evil present in the world, in each one of us and around us.

Well, no wonder quite a few of you were missing Wednesday. However, it's not too late to reconsider your commitment to battling evil; so don't go just yet.

What is so interesting in today's Gospel is the Holy Spirit is so forceful in pushing Jesus into wilderness to be tempted by Satan. I find this contradicts what I think the Holy Spirit should have done. Shouldn't the Holy Spirit have protected Jesus from such a bad influence?

The temptations here are not described as they are in Matthew and Luke. But in summary those temptations of Christ though distinct all confuse good with evil. What is evil is seen as good. And here is the difficulty in facing evil – we can confuse it with good and confuse good with evil.

To see clearly and then to not confuse good and evil requires spiritual battle. But we are not talking about medieval Crusades or current culture battles. This Christian battle always takes place inside of ourselves. But lest we be confused it is not the exertion of will power. It is the practice of loving attentiveness. It is moving ourselves from sleep-walking through life to waking to life.

Spiritual combat requires fighting off the sleep that would lull us into unconsciousness. And that sleep would take us into a fog where we confuse good with evil. The battle is to fight to stay awake.

The battle is also to fight against the herd mentality or groupthink. Groupthink avoids doing what is right by trying to keep one out of conflict with others. Terrible decisions are made this way. Good can be confused with evil.

To get away from groupthink and to see clearly can require going into the wilderness inside ourselves away from others, encountering wild beasts, and even the devil himself and clearly claiming a truth we need to live our lives.

I think Martin Luther King, Jr. experienced the Spirit pushing him into the wilderness. Wasn't he in a wilderness in that Birmingham jail in 1963? He was confined after being arrested for his part in a non-violent protest conducted against segregation.

While in Jail eight white Alabama clergymen in April 1963, wrote in "A Call For Unity. The clergymen agreed that social injustices were wrong but that Dr. King's approach was all wrong.

What they were saying was civil disobedience was wrong and should not be used to further civil rights. And what was right was to just wait.

His now famous "Letter From a Birmingham Jail" I think contains descriptions of being in the wilderness.

"Perhaps I have once again been too optimistic."

"I must honestly reiterate that I have been disappointed with the church."

He doesn't say the words, "I have a dream," but does write of, "shattered dreams".

He also writes, "I had hoped that each of you would understand. But again I have been disappointed."

I hear in this being in the wilderness.

But also in that letter I hear that in the wilderness he is clarifying any confusion in what is right and what is wrong; or any confusion about what is good and what is evil.

"Any law that uplifts human personality is just. Any law that degrades human personality is unjust."

"Hence segregation is not only politically, economically and sociologically unsound, it is morally wrong and sinful."

"I can urge them to disobey segregation ordinances, for they are morally wrong."

This is like Jesus in the wilderness: Speaking the truth about what is right and what is wrong; about what is good and what is evil.

And then after all that in the wilderness Jesus could really help others.

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“Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God.”

Dr. King proclaimed the good news on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial four months after being in that Birmingham jail. This was the defining moment of our civil rights movement and the conscience of the country was forever awakened by this good news.

But it isn't just a journey for Jesus and Dr. King; it's for all of us.

Lent is that journey into the wilderness to face the evil that would have us see good as evil and evil as good. And after that to proclaim the good news. Rarely are we called to proclaim it in sermons but always through our lives.

I think of people I know who went to the wilderness and through their faith clarified what is good and what is evil and then went out to proclaim with their lives the good news.

I think of my friend who years ago felt she entered the wilderness when she left her abusive husband. She was confused about whether or not she had done something bad or good. She felt like a worthless person.

Later she experienced clarity and knew that it was good for her to take care of herself. I watched her blossom and her life become successful. She proclaimed good news to others after the wilderness when she later began volunteering at an unwed mothers' home in Los Angeles.

I think of a friend who lost his way through addiction. He had thought his drinking had a good effect alleviating his stress.

Later after almost destroying his life he ended up in the wilderness.

Clarity revealed that the effects of his drinking had only been evil. Several years later I saw him proclaim good news he sponsored someone in AA after two years of his own sobriety.

I think of other friends who were confounded in the wilderness and who found clarity about good and evil. After the wilderness, each one who did went on to proclaim with their lives the good news to others.

We are proclaiming good news here every Saturday night during Lent. By welcoming the homeless with a meal and a place to sleep. And we proclaim the good news that we respect their dignity of every human being.

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Going to the wilderness where wild beasts are and
the encounter with the devil,
and the clarifying right from wrong apart from groupthink,

and perhaps under rare circumstances giving up vegetables for Lent,
to battle against evil
which is religious language for freeing ourselves to become our own
person, the person God meant us to be.
And once being that person able to help others by proclaiming the good news.

Let us break free from the evil that keeps us down and take hold of the good that lifts us
and all other up to keep a Holy Lent.