

Church of the Resurrection, Centerville – Lent 1B – Homily by Ruth Eller

*In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. (Mark 1:9-15)*

Suppose you were going on a camping trip in the desert. What would you take with you?

I know what I would take, because I've done it many times. I'd fill up my five-gallon water jug, for starters—and have a few extra small bottles, just in case. I'd pack my food bin with canned goods and crackers. I'd make sure my cookware was all present and accounted for. Then there would be the clothes and tent and sleeping bag. Just before getting on the road, I'd fill the heavy-duty cooler with a big block of ice and some drinks and fresh food. Then I'd pack the car, load the CD player with my favorite tunes and set out. In the last town before I made the fateful turn-off onto the corduroy dirt track, I'd top off the gas tank. Oh, yes, I'd be prepared.

What about Jesus—what does he take with him into the wilderness?

Looks like he only takes one thing—his baptism. But that carries with it something else, something much more important than the water itself. It carries with it the assurance of God's love: *"You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."*

Right after Jesus heard those words, according to Mark the Spirit *drove* him into the wilderness. Jesus was on the verge of making a complete change in his manner of living. He was turning away from the settled life of a carpenter in a country town to—well, to whatever it was God was calling him to. He was wide open, ready to be driven into the wilderness and be tested by the Enemy and discern his new path.

Mark doesn't say exactly how he was tested, but we can imagine, in a general way, because we've been there: "Are you sure you really want to do this? Things are so comfortable back home, in the old routine. Why would you want to give that up just to bring some message about repentance and forgiveness and all that stuff to people who probably won't even listen to you?" Or—and this is what the other gospels suggest: "What a great idea! Get out of that old place where nobody recognizes your true worth. Make a name for yourself. After all, you're someone special—God told you so. No doubt he'll make sure you get rich and powerful and never come to any harm. Go for it!"

Of course Jesus didn't fall for these ploys. This is what the Proper Preface of the day means when it says he was "tempted in every way as we are, yet did not sin". Instead, Jesus emerges and follows his own special call as God's beloved child. And what was that? Well, first of all it was a call to call others: "The kingdom of God has come near. Repent—turn around—and believe the Good News." He had changed his life. Now he summoned others to join him, and change theirs. As he still summons us today.

The season of Lent is an invitation to respond to his call. To turn around. To wake up to the fact of our own Baptism and follow Jesus into the wilderness. We have been invited, not driven, because we may have allowed the voice that tells us we are God's beloved children to become faint. Maybe it's been drowned out completely by the other voices that clamor for our attention—the demands of family or work; the chattering fear

that we won't have enough; the noisy passions that consume us. Unlike us, Jesus was already in a state of high awareness. He heard the voice speaking directly to him. For him, the prompting of the Spirit was urgent and immediate. As for us—we have to be invited, often and at greater length. Still, the Voice is there, the Wilderness is there, and the Spirit moves us to listen and to take our journey.

Lent invites us to strip down to the essentials. Forget the comforting water jug and the big bin of food, the tent and the sleeping bag. Lent asks: What do you really need?

What do you really need? Strip down—in food, in drink. Strip down—in spending. And most importantly, strip down in spirit.

What does that mean, “Strip down in spirit?” That means saying “No” to the tempter who whispers that you are really cool and don't have to change one little bit. Saying “No” to the idea that you have to make other people bow to your will. Stripping down in spirit means discarding emotional baggage, especially the refusal to forgive. Lent is first and foremost a time for reconciliation. If the other party won't reconcile, too bad. You can do your part.

Never mind whether or not the people you need to forgive *deserve* to be forgiven. Who does deserve it? I certainly don't. Do you? The point of God's covenant with Noah, marked by that shining rainbow, is that God sets no prerequisites for forgiveness. Forgiveness is not some kind of diploma we earn when we've passed all the right courses. Besides, remember that Jesus taught us to pray: “forgive us our trespasses *as we forgive those who trespass against us.*” Has God already forgiven us? Of course. But in order to benefit from that forgiveness, to lighten the burden of our guilt, we must let go of the weight of our own cherished anger.

Too much stuff, too much money, too much insecurity, too much guilt, too much resentment: These are things you do not need. Give them over to God. You do not need them because wherever you go, you take with you exactly what Jesus took—your baptism and the knowledge that you are God's beloved child. What more in the world could you possibly need than that?

What are the results of this stripping down? Strip down in food and drink—and you will be more attentive to the real needs of your body. You will be more intentional about what you put into it, and more in touch with the God who made it. You might even expand that intentional stripping down to include consumption of energy—does the TV need to be on all the time? Do you need to make ten trips to the store this week? Can you put on a sweater instead of turning up the heat? Go a little greener for Lent and tune in to the lilies of the field.

Strip down in spending and you will have more to give away to people in need and to the spreading of the Good News. You might increase your pledge, just for these few weeks. Or give to the Food Pantry or ERD.

Finally, strip down in spirit—and the love of God will dissolve that heavy chain of old hurts and resentments that's been weighing you down. You are God's beloved child. You can be free. God's love can fill you once again and then overflow into the lives of others who desperately need to know that love.

This is the invitation to a holy Lent: to let go of all that holds you back from fully accepting God's love. It is an invitation to follow Jesus into the wilderness. There will be voices that will try to distract you. Listen to them, by all means—so you can identify

them for what they are, tests of your priorities. And then let the only voice that counts override the rest, the voice that says you are God's beloved child.

*"The kingdom of God has come near. Repent, and believe in the good news."*