

*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. He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him.*

*Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news."*

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Our forty-day Lenten journey began this past Wednesday when we remembered that “*we are dust, and to dust we shall return.*” Some of us (and maybe even most of us) don’t like hearing that very much. It freaks us out to think about death generally, not to mention the fact that one day *we* will die.

Yet paradoxically, this mark of our mortality is good news. It is a reminder that we are creatures and not the Creator. That frees us from the foolish notions of thinking we are god, or that we can control everything that happens in our lives, or that we need to be perfect. The ashes allow us to focus on trying to be *human* and even more specifically to be the specific and unique person God has created us to be.

This mark of our mortality also frees us from the mistaken notion of thinking that we have all the time in the world to do that. We do not. We probably all know people who postpone living until after college, or after the next promotion, or after retirement...only to arrive at the day when they will at long last enjoy life and hear the doctor saying the word “cancer.”

Here, too, however, this Lenten reminder that our days are limited can be received as good news, and as a great gift. Because our days are numbered, each one is precious. We are invited to “seize the day” by living in the present moment. People who have had a brush with death or face a terminal illness very often gain this wisdom, daring to ask as they contemplate the end of their lives the central question that each of us can only answer for ourselves: what will you do with your one, wild and precious life?

Once we are freed from the false (and dangerous) notion that we must do everything, we can remember that we are called to do *something*. This forty days of Lent can then become a time for prayer and reflection and discernment: an opportunity to open our hearts and minds to God as we seek to understand the “something” that we can do, both as individuals and as a community of faith, to participate in the Easter life with Christ. For that is where this journey is taking us: to the Promised Land, to the empty tomb, to the promise of new and abundant life.

So three days after the ashes, we come to this first Sunday of Lent and we begin with the Great Litany. *If we are standing tall today we pray for strength; if we are feeling weak-hearted we ask for comfort and help; if we have fallen down we ask God to raise us up again to new life.* That's one of the petitions we prayed in the Great Litany, a reminder that the journey of our lives continues to unfold and as it does we will find ourselves in different places each Lent. This season we may be standing tall; if so we ask for strength. Our friend, however, two pews away from us may be feeling weak-hearted or may even have fallen down: we pray together for comfort and help and the promise of new life for our sisters and brothers. We may trade places next Lent, or the season after that. But all of us are utterly dependent upon God. The Great Litany gives us a chance to be thankful that God has given us to one another as companions in this pilgrim journey.

Yes, the Great Litany is long and clearly it comes from a pre-text-message world. Some of the language may be off-putting to us theologically or need to be translated to make sense to modern people. But this ancient prayer also reminds us as we embark on this journey that the Church wasn't invented last Tuesday afternoon. The Church is bigger than us, bigger than St. Francis, bigger than the Episcopal Church or the Anglican Communion. We are members of a communion of saints that extends back even further than that first Pentecost which we sometimes call "the birthday of the Church"—back to Moses and the prophets and the people God led out of their bondage in Egypt and toward the Promised Land.

Sometimes we wish the Church would change faster and adapt more quickly to our modern and post-modern concerns. I get that and I feel that way a fair amount myself. We rightly expect the Church to be relevant to the context of this time and place. But I am also comforted by the fact that the roots of a holy, catholic, and apostolic Church go deep—like an old gnarly tree that is still able to bring forth new life each spring. It means among other things that we don't need to be overly anxious about what we believe or don't believe on a given day: the Church can hold it for us as we continue to grow into the full stature of Christ.

In the early Church, Lent was the time to prepare converts to the faith for Holy Baptism, which would then happen at the Great Vigil of Easter. Baptism isn't fire insurance. It's not a magic "get out of hell" free card. It's a reminder that we have been knit together into the fabric of a faith community that has died with Christ; yet because we have died with him we have also been raised with him to new life. Just as God claims Jesus as the Beloved in the River Jordan, so each of us have also been claimed and marked and sealed as Christ's beloved forever. It is also a reminder that we are members of one another; part of a community that shares one another's joys and bears one another's burdens.

Like our Biblical forebears, however, we are prone to suffer from *amnesia*. The whole Book of Deuteronomy, one of my favorites in all of Scripture, is a plea to God's people to remember Or to be more precise and literally correct, to "not forget." The slaves who left Egypt with Pharaoh's army on their heels forty years earlier were changed by their wilderness experience in the Sinai Desert. So we see them in Deuteronomy standing on the verge of the Promised Land, almost able to taste the "milk and honey" that await them.

*Not so fast*, Moses says. Before they can enter into that land, Moses has something to say. Actually he's been working on a long sermon for forty years so they might as well get comfortable. He's an

old man who has been reflecting on a ministry that began with confronting Pharaoh's claim on their lives and the crossing of the Red Sea followed by four decades wandering around in the Sinai Desert. Moses preaches a lengthy sermon but like most long sermons it can be repetitive and there is really just one main point, so even if you doze in and out of the Book of Deuteronomy you can't miss it. He tells the Israelites they have two choices: to get busy living or get busy dying. If they mean to choose life, he says, the key practices are to remember where they have come from and to give thanks to God in all things. He says:

*Remember what you learned in the wilderness. Remember what it is like to be utterly dependent upon God, one day at a time, for daily manna and water. Whatever successes come your way, don't forget who you are and where you have come from. You were slaves whom God has given the gift of freedom. Don't fool yourself into the idolatrous notion that you are self-made or self-reliant, because there is no such thing. And remember to always be grateful for the blessings that come your way; because in the midst of affluence you will be tempted to forget what a miracle the small things of life truly are.*

So when Jesus is driven into the wilderness for forty days after his Baptism, this is the context. He is not sent there as some kind of punishment, but as something more like what native peoples might call a "vision quest." He is going to the place where his ancestors found God—the place where daily manna and water and Torah were all given as gifts by a generous and merciful God. Yes, the God of the Old Testament is generous and merciful! The God of the Old Testament is the One whom Jesus teaches us to call "Abba." Jesus goes to the desert in order to be in touch with the core experience of his people, back to the place where a band of slaves fled from Egypt in search of a better life. There he is tested for forty days, just as his people had been tested for forty years.

One of the desert fathers from the early Christian tradition, Abba Evagrius, said: "take away temptation and no one will be saved." Like so many of those desert teachings this is worth pondering. We sometimes think that all temptation should be avoided. But what happens when we begin to see temptation as the path toward spiritual growth? The move from slavery to freedom is never easy. Sometimes we'll resist temptation and it will make us stronger and clearer about what it is God is calling on us to do next. Sometimes we'll fall in temptation; but God is a God of second chances, a God who forgives, a God of steadfast love and mercy. *If we are standing tall today we pray for strength; if we are feeling weak-hearted we ask for comfort and help; if we have fallen down we ask God to raise us up again to new life.*

The invitation of this season, from beginning to end, is not about shame or guilt or fear. It is meant to draw us closer to the love of God in Jesus Christ, so that in that love we gain a greater clarity about who we are called to be and whom it is that we are called to serve. May the days ahead be so for us, and may the angels of God minister to us as they ministered to Jesus.