

1 Lent, Year B  
Mark 1:9-15

The scripture readings today point us toward our celebration of the Feast of the Resurrection, and to the waters of Baptism, but they also remind that if we hope to experience the deepest, truest joy of Easter, there is some important work to be done before we get there.

Every year when I hear the story of Jesus being driven out into the wilderness I have a powerful, vivid memory.

It's been going on for almost 40 years.

When I hear this story I remember the day Jane and I arrived in Palm Springs for my first assignment after my graduation from seminary and my ordination.

When we drove into Palm Springs, Jane Strane wept.

My own reaction wasn't quite as strong, but I agreed with her that it was one of the ugliest places I had ever seen.

We had just come from the lush, green hills of northern Virginia, and when we entered the desert community of Palm Springs all we could see were different shades of brown and grayish green - cactus, rocks, sand and dirt, everywhere we looked.

The fact that it was about 112 degrees didn't help.

We lived in Palm Springs for two summers, and by the time we left, both of us had very different feelings about that desert place.

We came to recognize it as a place of tremendous physical beauty, and we also realized that the desert possesses a powerful spiritual quality that was unlike any place we had ever been before.

I came to be aware that down through the ages there have been some others who apparently felt the same way, that there is a unique spiritual quality about the desert.

The prophet Hosea has God say to Israel, “I will allure you into the desert, and there I will speak to you in the depths of your heart.” Hosea 2:14

Muhammed went to a mountain in the desert of Saudi Arabia before he began his ministry.

Siddhartha Gautama, the Buddha, wandered for years in the desert of India before he went into the cities with his message of enlightenment.

Throughout the ages, the desert has always been a place for the great encounter with God, a place where people have

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experienced with piercing clarity the demands and the joys of being in relationship with the living God.

The season of Lent is meant to be a journey of the heart to the Cross of Jesus Christ, and then to the empty tomb, and the reality that each of us needs to confront as we begin this season is that Easter can come only to the heart that has first known Lent.

The real and deepest joy of the empty tomb can come only to the heart that has arrived by way of the desert.

This morning's Gospel reading tells the story of Jesus going into the wilderness — of being driven by the Spirit into the desert.

He goes right after he has been baptized by John.

He goes to be reminded of who he is and of what he was born to do.

This story on the first Sunday in Lent is a challenge to each one of us to go into the desert to seek the great encounter with God.

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It's a challenge to get ourselves into a place where we can experience with crystal clarity the demands and the joys of being in relationship with God.

Some people would argue that the monks and nuns who have gone off to the desert have opted out of the real world, that they have hidden in places where they are sheltered from the harshest realities of life.

Do you suppose it could be the other way around?

Could it be that the ones who have hidden from reality are the ones who have lost themselves in the rat race of modern social, economic, material and political systems?

I think maybe so.

I think so.

During the day if we find ourselves sitting still and surrounded by silence most of us will find some way of getting busy.

We do that because our society has told us that to be still and silent is to be unproductive, and that to be unproductive is to be irresponsible.

We've been told that to sit still means to be unuseful, to waste time.

What we haven't been told nearly enough, but what I believe we realize on some subconscious level, is that to be still and silent also means providing a space for the great encounter with God.

It means taking the chance of being confronted by the demands of becoming the people we were created to be.

It means running the risk of being confronted by the demands of living the lives our baptismal promises call us to live.

It means being in the desert, exposed and alone with God.

For a lot of us that is just too frightening, and we keep ourselves very busy to avoid it.

But the ones who actually do make it into the desert learn some valuable, life-changing lessons.

First, they learn that the great encounter is a frightening thing.

Being alone and exposed before God is a humbling experience.

But they also learn that once they have opened themselves to the possibility of that encounter, they can never go back.

Once a person has glimpsed the person he or she was created to be there can be no turning back.

Once the human heart has truly begun the journey toward God it will never be able to rest until, as St. Augustine said, it finds its rest in God.

These are the ones who have learned that journeying toward God is what the human heart is meant to do.

The ones who are able to make it into the desert also learn that they aren't ever really alone in that place.

That's because when we are able to go into the desert or the darkness, and to open ourselves to that soul-searing encounter with ourselves and with God, Jesus will always be there, to meet us, and to see us safely through to the other side.

There is never a way of knowing how barren the desert will be, or how long it will take to get through it, but there is the promise that Jesus will be there, and that he will go with us until we reach the other side.

Maybe that promise will be enough to help some of us decide to pluck up our courage and to go in, to do the work we need to do.

If we do try to go into that place where we can know God and know ourselves and learn something about the will of God for our lives, we may meet satan, the evil one, the same way Jesus did.

And the evil one may say to us, “You’re being silly. You’ve got more important things to do. You’re wasting time. I know a better way. I know an easier way.”

But if we will run the risk of feeling silly or the appearance of wasting time, then we will have opened ourselves to the possibility of the great encounter with God.

If we can open ourselves to the possibility of that encounter, then we will know that Lent is a time for turning over the soil and for planting seeds that will produce new growth.

Every year the deserts of the earth come alive and explode with a spectacular blooming of flowers.

Each Lent offers us a chance for the same kind of blooming in our hearts and lives.

If we’re not in a place where that can happen now, today is a day for hearing the invitation to go into that place, the place where Jesus will meet us and see us through to the other side, to the place called Easter, resurrection, new life.

Go ahead, go in — and Godspeed.

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