

Matthew 4:1-11

Happy Lent! And yes, I really do think Lent is a happy occasion. I came across a meme this week with a picture of Ned Stark saying, "Brace yourselves. A bunch of grumpy people who gave up caffeine are coming to church today." And it reminded me how Lent can get a bad rap –that it's easy not to notice the underlying joy that Lent really can be. Lent is a solemn season, but it is also a joyful season because it is about preparing ourselves for the wonderful celebration of Easter-the victory of love over death. But first...we have some work to do...and the work we do, most importantly, is the work of building and deepening our relationship with God, as Fr. Mark reminded us last week.

So how do we do that? If we take a look at our Gospel lesson today, I think we gain some insight into how that might happen for us in this season. There we read that God's Spirit lead Jesus into the desert and while in the desert Jesus fasted and prayed for 40 days. These 40 days mirror our 40 days of Lent. And in the desert Jesus left the distractions of his home and city to focus solely on God. Of course, the devil sought Jesus out and offered him some fairly heavy temptations during his desert experience – which were no doubt a source of distress for Jesus.

But it was in the desert that Jesus not only drew close to God spiritually, but he gained clarity about his life and calling. This time of spiritual work strengthened him and prepared him for his public ministry.

I believe we too are called into the desert by God's Spirit at various times. I don't think the deserts of life are usually literal deserts (though they might be...I think of our own Edie Sundby's journey through the desert described in her book "The Mission Walker")...but usually they are spiritual desert experiences.

Sometimes we choose to go into the desert – and this can happen for us during Lent. But often I

have found that the desert experiences of life simply find us. Unlike a mountaintop experience, when we feel fulfilled and whole and ready to take on the world, a desert experience is a time of emptiness -we may feel confused, grieved, alone, hungry.... even desolate. They can be very challenging. I know I have had several desert experiences in my life – and often I did not seek them out. These have been times when I felt personally and spiritually dry – when God seemed distant to me or when I was struggling in some deep personal and spiritual ways. At other times I intentionally chose to empty my life in ways to make room for what I needed to learn or do...thus creating a desert experience.

What about you? What are some of your desert experiences? Are you in a desert now? They can happen when we burn out.... or during a time of loss...or illness. We may feel lost or confused. Or perhaps just a sense of emptiness – like something is deeply missing. It's good for us to remember that desert experiences are not necessarily bad experiences – but they can be very challenging. If we can navigate our desert experiences with God's help, these times can become our most deeply fulfilling and spiritually fruitful times in life...times when we grow in depth as people, develop spiritually, and gain clarity about our lives - just as Jesus experienced in the desert. And when temptations come, as they do in the desert, we can lean on prayer and God's Word and promises to get us through, as Jesus did.

But desert experiences can be a bit scary. This summer my sister and I took my children out to the desert and we spent some time visiting Joshua Tree National Park. It was extremely hot and it seemed like we were the only people inside the park that day. We entered through the back entrance and stopped at the Ranger's Station where we warned to have plenty of water on us before we proceeded and to realize that our cell phones wouldn't work. We had packed water and snacks and our AC was working well, so we set off in the car. We had been driving through Joshua Tree for over hour and had not seen one single other person or car... and then

we spied a dirt road that went far off the main road, designated as being for “off road vehicles only.” My car is an all-wheel-drive vehicle, so we took the road less traveled and found ourselves way out in the middle of what seemed like truly nowhere- in a very desolate and empty space of desert with some amazing rock formations. We stopped and I turned off the car and we got out and began to explore and climb. The heat reminded me that we shouldn't stay out too long. And then for a moment I asked everyone to stop, be quiet and just listen – we got silent - there was not a single human-made sound in the air – just the wind and the occasional cry from a bird of prey. After a few moments of silence, a rather terrifying thought hit me- what if our car didn't start for some reason? What would we do? There were no other human beings that would be coming our way today and our phones were useless. The realization of just how vulnerable we really were hit me with full force and a sense of overwhelming but loving responsibility for my children's safety overtook me. Fortunately, when we did go to leave, the car started – but the feeling stayed with me.

I realized, in the desert, we are stripped of the illusion of self-sufficiency. In the desert we can see our weakness and vulnerability, in the desert we know we need God and God's people, in the desert there is clarity about what really matters, and in the desert we have space to ponder our mortality....to remember that “we are but dust, and to dust we shall return.”

This Ash Wednesday Fr. Mark and I went out into the village of La Jolla to offer “Ashes to Go” and this time we found that some of the local businesspeople were actually looking for us. About 30 people stopped for prayers and ashes and they all thanked us profusely. On several occasions, as I placed the ashes on someone's forehead, tears filled their eyes...and there was a moment, brief as it was, of spiritual vulnerability and openness to God...like an empty space had just been filled with God's Spirit.

Last week Fr. Mark preached about Lent and described his dislike for “giving up things in Lent.” And while I agree with our Rector that it's important to take on a spiritual practice in Lent, I have to disagree with him about the importance of also giving up something for Lent. And since he's not here this morning but with the Vestry on retreat, I'm taking the opportunity to voice a different opinion. I would say we must give up something in order to make room to take on something else. Let's say you decide to attend some of our Lenten classes for instance – the fact is, you first have to give up something –you will be giving up some free time or, perhaps if you come on Sunday morning, you will be giving up some extra sleep. The point behind fasting- of going without food- is to allow our physical hunger to make us aware of our spiritual hunger for God. The point of giving up something is to create the necessary space for something new...in this case, to create space for God. And this is what is so compelling to me about the desert and desert experiences – it is in the absence of our everyday life, of our creature comforts, with all the distractions, preoccupations, and illusions about our life that we can find the emptiness and space to connect more fully with God. And actually, I think Fr. Mark would agree – he has asked that we observe more silence in our liturgies during Lent – and what is silence but the giving up of words? God can't hand us something new if our hands are full.

Lent is a time to enter into the desert willingly: to stop, create space, and enter the silence. And you are invited to go into the desert this Lent, to journey with Jesus for 40 days. So, go and embrace your desert – and in time, the desert will lead you back to the mountaintop ...and the fullness of joy and Easter.

Happy Lent!