

## First Sunday of Lent, Cycle B

Genesis 9:8-15 and Mark 1:12-15

The expanse of Lent yawns before us once again. Lent always feels so long to me, not like that perky little whip, Advent, less than four weeks long and filled with Christmas cheer. Advent is about hope, waiting and light in the darkness, while Lent is about deserts, fasting and repentance. We look for ways out of the discomfort by putting a positive spin on Lent: "What will you do?" rather than "What will you give up?" After all, we Americans are about solutions and life has been hard enough this past year.

The Temptation of Jesus leads us in another direction. In Mark's version, we find no battle of wits between Jesus and the devil, no pithy Scripture quotes, just five simple phrases. First, "The Spirit drove Jesus out into the desert." Notice that God initiates desert time. The Spirit has a way of driving us into things we would not necessarily choose, including taking a stark look inward. I admire the Spirit's wisdom and pushiness. We all need self-reflection and an adjustment of our perspective. What is really going on inside of us? It is tempting to minimize this need to something we can do on the fly, but reflection requires solid chunks of time.

Thus, we next hear that Jesus "remained in the desert for forty days." Although the Spirit initiates, Jesus chooses to stay for forty days, a number representing whatever time is needed to accomplish the spiritual change God desires for him. What spiritual change could Jesus need? What in the world could we think about for forty days? Recall that this desert time follows Jesus' baptism where he experienced the sky opening, the Spirit descending and the voice declaring, "You are my beloved child; with you I am well pleased." Every human being, including Jesus, needs endless time with that truth. To know we are loved unconditionally opens up life to us. We feel secure. We feel capable and purposeful. We can delight in the world and be creative. We can see others as God does and love them as God does. Desert time is about aligning our perspective with God's perspective of love.

However, the third phrase, "tempted by Satan," reveals desert time is no spa day. There are so many ways to distort love. Out of his experience at his baptism, Jesus could have grown a huge ego or he could have decided that God loved others less. On the other extreme, he could have refused or doubted God's love. We all find ourselves tempted to look at things in sinful ways. The Greek word for sin is *hamartia*, literally, to miss the mark when shooting. Our perspective so often leads us to miss the mark, as we generate endless quantities of garbage for the sake of our convenience, as we look to possessions to make us happy, as we think the only bodies worth having are young ones, or as we push out people because they are different or because we fear there is not enough for everyone. Awareness of Satan's temptations reveals our sinful perspectives so God can help us refocus.

We find that Jesus "was among wild beasts." Wild beasts conjure up images of Creation and the scope of God's domain. These are the same animals that died when God wiped the world clean of human sin in the Great Flood, the same animals impacted by human-generated global warming today. Desert time helps us to see our connection to nature and all that implies.

Lastly, Mark tells us "the angels ministered to him." Angels are extensions of God, the tools with which God interacts with humans; their ministry to Jesus expresses God's tender concern for him as he undergoes the discomfort of his desert stay. God expresses the same kindness in the first reading, where God sets up the rainbow to mark a one-sided covenant: no matter how badly we humans screw things up, God will never again wipe everything out to fix things. God is committed to all the desert time we need. We go into Lent accompanied by God who sets the rainbow in the sky, by Jesus who knows firsthand about desert time and by the Spirit who knows that we need forty days to be ministered to by angels.

- ❖ Remind yourself throughout the day that you are God's child and God is well pleased with you – and that the same can be said about people who bother you. What impact do these reminders have?
- ❖ What angels has God sent you so far this Lent?