



The Rev. Alan Sutherland, Rector

February 10, 2008

**Lent 1A**  
**Rev. Donna Barr**

Every season of Lent begins in the same way. Jesus, still wet from his baptism, with the words, *You are my Son, the Beloved*, still ringing in his ears, is led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil.

Immediately after Jesus received his call to public ministry in the waters of the Jordan and even before he had time to gather together his band of followers, Jesus is exiled for 40 days into the isolated, lonely desert. Just when he is at the point of complete starvation, just when he is about at the end of his wilderness journey, the devil creeps up on him. As seductive as only the devil can be, he uses Scripture to test the Son of God. Wrestling with the temptations of self-sufficiency, power and fame, Jesus counters his adversary with words of Scripture, as well. He tells his tempter that it is not his own power in which he places his complete trust, but in God, his Father. Powerless, the devil can do nothing except slink away. Here in this desolate, barren wasteland of a wilderness Jesus first confronts for himself what it means to be the *Chosen One*. And it is here he begins his journey to the cross.

I retell this story to you because as we follow Jesus on the way to the cross this Lenten season, we are, thus, bound to follow him into the wilderness, as well. Lent is the most important time of year to nurture our inner life. It is the time during which we not only prepare ourselves to celebrate the mystery of the death and resurrection of Jesus, but also the death and resurrection that constantly takes place within us....within **our** very souls.

Life is a continuing process of the death of the old and familiar, and being reborn again into a new hope, a new trust, and a new love.

The death and resurrection of Jesus therefore is not just an historical event that took place a long time ago, but an inner event that takes place in our own heart when we are willing to be attentive to it.

True repentance is an interior attitude in which we are willing to let go of everything that prevents us from growing into spiritual maturity. But spiritual maturity is not easy.....

Jesus tells us to go to our room, close the door..... look within ourselves and pray to our Father in heaven. Lent is a time to leave our comfortable, safe places and be led by the Spirit into our own spiritual

ST. JOHN'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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deserts. The wilderness is a dangerous and disorienting environment for us. In it we find ourselves vulnerable and alone.

In it, we are compelled, as Jesus was, to face the demons in our own lives and see how we have been tempted to trust only ourselves and turn away from our God. In the loneliness of the wilderness experience, we come to see ourselves as we truly are.

Many times I hear people ask “What should I give up for Lent?” Should it be chocolate or coffee or junk food? Giving up something for Lent has become like our New Years resolutions.

We are ambitious in our efforts to give up some bad habit or we desire to change something we don't like about ourselves. I encourage others not only to practice acts of fasting but to take on Lenten disciplines like praying Evening prayer or studying the Bible or visiting people who are alone or sick. All of these practices of giving up... come out of our best intentions to be faithful participants in this holy season. But as I reflect on some of my own past Lenten experiences, I realize that at the end of the season

I would pat myself on the back, so proud of not sneaking that one piece of bread. The practice, however, was for me just a practice.

It did nothing to lead me deeper into any real time of self-examination.

These practices can and should be entryways into the wilderness journey. Too often, however, we stand at the threshold,

on the edge of the desert, unwilling to go any further onto the path of self-discovery, unwilling to stand before God and open our hearts to the mercy and healing that come from God alone.

James Healy writes, “Whether we gaze with longing into that beautiful garden, where Adam and Eve first walked or whether we look with fear and trembling into the desert, of this we can be sure –God walked there first! And when we who have sinned and dishonored the garden are challenged now to face the desert, we do not face it alone. Jesus has gone there before us to struggle with every demon that has ever plagued the human heart.”

Face the desert we must if we would reach the garden, but remember Jesus has gone there before us.”

Jesus has gone there before us.

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In the lonely days of his desert journey, tempted and taunted by the devil's alluring words, Jesus came to know more clearly of his belovedness and the path he must take as God's chosen One.

And so it is with us. It is in the solitude of the wilderness where we are confronted by the demons in our lives that tempt us to deny our need for God and God alone.

It is also in the solitude of the wilderness that we are able to hear more clearly God calling us by name, calling us as chosen Ones.

Finally, it is in the solitude of the wilderness we walk side by side with Jesus to the cross and through the empty tomb into new life.

In this season of Lent, I encourage you to enter into the wilderness. Don't just stand beyond the desert's border, hoping to look on from this safe vantage point. Dare to enter into the work and struggle of the wilderness experience and so discover more fully who you are and who your God is calling you to be.

Take heart.

We do not go it alone.

We do not face it alone.

Jesus has gone there before us and Jesus will be there with us in the midst of our wilderness.

Amen

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