

Genesis 9:8-17

Psalm 25:1-9

1 Peter 3:18-22

Mark 1:9-15

No matter what anyone else tells you about how things work, we all know that we all live inside our own heads. Our own experiences, our own emotions, our own interpretations of what goes on around us, and our own intellect all contribute to how we see the world and how we see ourselves in that world. We are with ourselves 24-7...even when we are sleeping and our mental life comes to us in our dreams. How we interpret what we see and what we hear and what we experience is dependent on how our mental living space is arranged. All of us arrange the furniture of that living space in ways that make sense to us. The arrangement becomes familiar as we occasionally add a piece here, discard a piece there or rearrange all the pieces to give our mental space a new look and feel. No one gets to live in our mental space with us, no matter how close our relationship might be. This mental living space is ours alone and we have more control over it than we think. We can always throw away something...like the end table of gossip or the wooden chest filled with grudges. We discard these pieces of furniture when we get new information that makes more sense to us. And we can replace them with different pieces of our own choosing. We don't consciously realize it, but we are making these internal, mental and emotional adjustments all the time...as we add, discard, and rearrange our mental furniture. It's one way to describe how we grow internally...spiritually, emotionally and mentally. It's what happens to us when we have a transformational experience. We may throw out a whole bunch of furnishings all at one time. For one reason or another, our internal life is rearranged and we make interpretations in a different way. Sometimes we refer to this phenomenon as 'seeing the light' about some long-held belief or viewpoint that has been altered by a new experience or new information that makes more sense to us. And sometimes this occurs as the result of time we have spent in solitude. It is in periods of solitude that we have the time to make self-examinations and assess the mental furniture we are using: where it came from, how it influences us and whether or not it is still useful to us. Just because we grew up with one idea doesn't mean we need to hang onto it for a lifetime...especially when we get contradictory information.

Last Sunday, we celebrated the last Sunday after the Epiphany and the Transfiguration of Jesus. It was quite dramatic. It wasn't a transformation in which Jesus was internally altered in some way. The transfiguration was actually a revelation of the true nature of Jesus and the power that resided in him. The ones who were transformed were Peter, James, and John who

descended the mountain with a completely different understanding of who Jesus was. They had seen the light that was Jesus...literally...and they would never again be the same.

This morning, on this first Sunday of Lent, we learn how Jesus himself experienced a transformation of sorts. We've never been given the explanation for why Jesus presented himself to John for baptism. Surely it wasn't a baptism for the remission of sins, since Jesus was without sin. It may have been a matter of aligning himself with those who had come to the Jordan River to renounce the current societal status quo in which they were living and to open themselves to a new way of life...seeking the forgiveness for communal sins. They may not have known the significance of Jesus being at the River Jordan with them for baptism, but Jesus was preparing himself to begin sharing the Good News of the kingdom of God to any and to all who would listen. Whatever Jesus' motivation was for presenting himself to John for baptism, we do know that it was a pivotal event in his life. From a psychological point of view, Jesus' experiences at his baptism have all the signs of what Anton Boisen's classical terminology refers to as an internal "upheaval" and "reorganization" of a person's inner world. Boisen describes this as a psychological event that brings the individual into profound attunement with that which is highest and best in his or her universe of meaning and value.<sup>1</sup> For Jesus, that was God. This was, for Jesus, what we currently refer to as a mid-life crisis, but surely Jesus was already aware of his relationship with God. This baptismal experience marked the beginning of his ministry and mission and sealed the deal between God and Jesus.

Mark describes the events surrounding Jesus' baptism in religious terms: the heavens being torn open, the Spirit descending like a dove and a voice from heaven speaking directly to Jesus. The only other time in Mark's gospel when he speaks of the heavens being torn apart is at Jesus' crucifixion when the curtain in the Temple separating humanity from God is torn from top to bottom. With Jesus' death there is no longer a separation of humanity from God.

The Spirit that descends on Jesus like a dove, without warning, may very well have done more than just perch on Jesus or hover over him. The Greek translation for the word [*eis*] is not "on" in this passage but is actually "into." The Holy Spirit's arrival at Jesus' baptism changes meaning just a bit when we realize that the Holy Spirit actually went 'into' Jesus and became a part of him. This is what sets him apart from all the other prophets. Perhaps that may be why John the Baptist tells those who are listening to him that one will come after him who will baptize them not with water, but with the Holy Spirit.

And the voice that came from heaven was directed to Jesus personally: "You are my Son, the Beloved. In you I am well-pleased." The words are spoken in the second person 'YOU' and are meant to be a profound affirmation directly to Jesus. And then the Holy Spirit, residing within Jesus, drives him into the wilderness. The description of Jesus entering the wilderness leaves us with the impression that he had no choice. You may have had similar experiences in

your life when you felt compelled to do something that you may not have fully understood at the time. All of us can look at those times in retrospect and decide whether or not those were feelings inspired by God or were feelings that were ours alone.

With God's affirmation of him still fresh in his ears, Jesus enters the wilderness where he is accompanied by animals, Satan, and ministering angels. He's not alone in the wilderness. In the gospels of Luke and Matthew we are given detailed descriptions of what happened between Jesus and Satan. From them we learn about Satan's temptation of Jesus to use his profound powers in ways that are not aligned with God's will. Since Mark gives us no such details, we can only fill in the blank spots with our own imaginations and our own experiences with temptation. That's the thing about temptation. It's up to us to determine whether we are using the power God has given us to further the will of God as Jesus did.....or to indulge ourselves.....or even to run away from God as Satan would tempt us to do.

So many of us have been observing the season of Lent for years and in many different ways. We have given up different things at different times, but stop and think for a moment if our self-deprivation brought us any closer to God or even made any sense to us. Maybe not. The wilderness is not just a physical place. It can be a spiritual place as well. The chocolate we gave up for Lent may make the chocolate Easter bunny we get on Easter morning seem even more delicious, but did the experience bring us any closer to God's will for us?

This year, let's look at this differently. This year, let's look around and see what we can do during Lent that would deepen our own faith and bring the world around us closer to the Kingdom of God. Those are our two objectives. Fasting may have nothing to do with bread. That was only one of Jesus' temptations. Perhaps our observation of Lent may be related to how we use our power...in personal relationships as well as in the larger community. Are we taking actions with that power that will further the Kingdom of God? Maybe what we need to give up is our 'inaction' not our 'action.' Maybe our observation of Lent may be related to testing God in such a way that we try to make 'deals' with God rather than focusing on accepting whatever comes our way and asking for God's sustaining grace to manage it.

Our experiences of being in the wilderness during Lent will not be like the dramatic transformations that came to Jesus. But that doesn't mean that we can't have some transformations that may very well change the trajectory of our own lives and our own relationships...even with God. We can rearrange that mental furniture...the wooden chest filled with grudges; the endtables of gossip; the dining table loaded down with unforgiveness; and the bookcase of greed. We can discard them and replace them with furniture that is more suitable to this time and this place in our lives; furniture that reflects all we've learned and all that God has transformed within us. Let us pray for our own transformation.

When Jesus' time in the wilderness had ended, he emerged from the experience with supernatural powers and a revolutionary spiritual message...that we still preach and we try to follow today. When we come to the end of Lent this year with the joyous celebration of Easter, may we emerge from our own wilderness time with new perspectives, new problem solving skills, a fresh outlook on life and a closer relationship with the God who created us.

With God's help and God's guidance we can...and we will.

Thanks be to God.

AMEN.

<sup>1</sup>Feasting on the Word, Year B, Vol.2, David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, Editors, p44.