

We gathered here Wednesday evening. New color adorned the altar, the table, the lectern, the wall behind me. Made confession. We received ashes and the sign of the cross on our foreheads. We heard the words - Remember you are dust, and to dust you shall return. Lent has begun.

We are five days into Lent, counting Wednesday. This road we now walk is 40 days long. Forty is a special number in the Bible, ladden with significance: It was 40 years that the Israelites wandered in the wilderness after being delivered from egyptian slavery through the Red Sea. When Elijah fled through the wilderness from the wrath of Jezebel, God sent an angel who brought him bread and water, and it says, "...he went on the strength of that food forty days and forty nights..." And here we have Mark's Jesus driven into the wilderness, 40 days.

Do you hear the parallel here? Moses and the Israelites were delivered through water and found themselves in wilderness. Jesus emerges from his baptism in the Jordan and finds himself in wilderness. Forty years, forty days. And it is only after these wilderness sojourns that the promised land, the kingdom of God, comes near.

This parallel extends to our Lenten journey too. We will wander another 35 days in this bleak wilderness of Lent, at which point the nearness of God's kingdom, the promised salvation of God will dawn. But 35 days? How are we to navigate this wilderness? How best ought we to traverse this wild expanse? What path shall we take?

We ask these questions and, as if in reply, Psalm 25 responds - first echoing our concern (“Make me to know your ways, O Lord; teach me your paths... Lead me in your truth, and teach me”) then a calming answer (“All the paths of the Lord are steadfast love and faithfulness... [The Lord] will teach [us] the way that [we] should choose”).

So Psalm 25 responds, but perhaps in “not as helpful” a way as we might have hoped. It is what Jesus comes to Galilee proclaiming after his sojourn in the wilderness that gives the most direct answer to such questions. **How** ought we best traverse this wild expanse? Repent.

Quoting Alexander Schmemmann, the orthodox priest and writer, I called Lent on Wednesday night “the great school of repentance.” Elsewhere I’ve heard Lent described in a similar way as the “Season” of repentance, but Schmemmann describes it with more clarity using the word *school* - for there is learning to be done. Or rather, as he might say, *re-learning* or even recovery and rediscovery. He writes,

...the liturgical traditions of the Church, all its cycles and services, exist, first of all, in order to help us *recover the vision and the taste of that new life* [we receive in baptism] which we so easily lose and betray, so that we may repent and return to it.

This return, he says, is the meaning of Easter and why it requires Lent - the school of repentance.

Having heard a number of sermons now on repentance, what does it mean to you today? To return, to turn around, to alter one's life? These are all true but they seem to evade the depth that *repentance* invariably points to.

I read an article by Nannette Sawyer in the Christian Century magazine a week or two ago where she said this: "There's some kind of life that needs to be relinquished if there's to be a transformed life." Her piece was a reflection on the Transfiguration story from last Sunday, but I think it gets closer to capturing the radicalness of what Jesus comes proclaiming today.

To relinquish, to release, let go of, to leave behind "some kind of life" - this sounds incredibly scary. Like leaving behind anything that is familiar, routine, comfortable, or even habit, this letting go is stepping into unknown territory - a form of wilderness, truly. To strip off these layers that we know, in which we live, is to stand naked in a place of potentially danger and great vulnerability.

But Kate Bowler, a Lutheran Pastor, describes Lent as "Always at least two things." What do you think? How does that sound to you?

On Wednesday night, we sat in ashes - in biblical tradition, literally sitting in our sorrow, our pain and grief (These are not feelings foreign to the “almost-year” we’ve had). But in those ashes, we also anticipated Joy - joy that none of what this “almost-year” has held is enough to separate us from the Love of God in Christ. Joy in the fact that Easter is still coming. | It rings true: Lent, always at least two things - Ashes and Joy.

Well the repentance Sawyer describes (relinquishing “some kind of life”), this central piece or process of Lent is at least two things as well: It’s a letting go, and it’s a taking up.

The letting go, I’ve described. What we might “take up” in Lent are what we call the Lenten Disciplines: Prayer, fasting and forgiveness. These disciplines have, over time, been thoroughly domesticated in the western church - so giving up chocolate or milk shakes has come to replace fasting, for instance. But to go back to the brass-taxes of their original purpose - to teach newly converted christians the faith, to prepare them for their baptism - is to know their usefulness in the work of repentance.

These disciplines (prayer, fasting and forgiveness) help us put some space between ourselves and the “some kind of life” we seek to relinquish. They also mark this time of Lent as separate, and they somehow free us from that which directs our attention away from the recovery we seek. These disciplines clothe us in intention and focus our attention beyond the distractions. And in a world such as this, full of such distractions and temptations, these tools of repentance can be a gift in this wilderness.

Typical of Mark, this episode of Jesus in the wilderness is abrupt, curious and perhaps cut short. The “fleshing out” that Matthew and Luke do make this a much richer story than what we find in Mark. But for all the details Mark’s account is missing, it does demand a closer look.

We are back at the baptism of Jesus by John in the Jordan. Emerging from the water, Jesus sees the sky torn apart and the spirit “descending as a dove” and the voice from heaven saying exactly what is said over us in our baptism | to which Lent is the long return, “You are my child and beloved. In you I am well pleased.”

In Matthew the Spirit “led” Jesus into the wilderness. In Luke, Jesus is “full of the Holy Spirit.” But in Mark “the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness.”

Mark’s account seems most honest about the life of faith. To experience the ultimate affirmation in the bare and complete love of God is so often followed by being driven into a wilderness of grief and shame. The parallels I pointed out with these 40 days echo the refrain we know in our own lives: Salvation, then wilderness. Deliverance, then wilderness. Ultimate affirmation, then | temptation.

We don't get from Mark anything really about how Satan tempted Jesus - "tempted by Satan" is barely mentioned in this verse. But the reality in those few words rings true doesn't it? We find ourselves in barren and lonely places in life, even as baptized and beloved children of God. And the Accuser stands **ready** in those places, endeavoring to **turn us** from the path and promise we've received - to turn us aside from our belovedness. Between so few details from Mark and the assignment of this text for this first Sunday in Lent, I hear a warning: Temptation to turn aside from the promise we have in Christ lies even here, in this wilderness of Lent.

What then are we to do? The disciplines of repentance will not save us from these wild places and accusing temptations. But the disciplines of repentance do offer something - they open us back up to the invitation. Tuning out the temptation we encounter in the wilderness, the voice of the Accuser, we hear the voice to follow: "You are my child, beloved. Come this way." The Accuser's voice is drowned out in that voice, by those waters, and by the Spirit we are driven back to the source of our refreshment, of our recovery - God's promise of steadfast love and faithfulness as our loving parent.

The Lenten road is 40 long days. But our start has been made and we cling to the voice that leads us, beckons us down the path. Lenten discipline will not save us but will rather tune us to hear the way forward. For God in Christ is in this wilderness too, calling us on, leading us in paths of steadfast love and faithfulness.

AMEN

Genesis 9

When the bow is in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant... I have established between me and all flesh...

Psalms 25

Make me to know your ways, O Lord; teach me your paths

Lead me in your truth, and teach me...

Be mindful (remember?) your mercy, O Lord, and your steadfast love

For they have been from of old.

All the paths of the Lord are steadfast love and faithfulness...

Who are they that fear the Lord?

He will teach them the way that they should choose.

(Paths and Remembrance)

1 Peter 3

Saved through water... now saves you...

Mark 1

Juxtaposition: Camel's hair/water, heavens torn apart/dove, voice from heaven/driven into the wilderness, wilderness beasts/angels serve him

Juxtaposition of Lent - Ashes/Joy (Lent is always both - Kate Bowler)

Matthew and Luke "flesh out" the element of temptation

Forty Days (Preparation)

"Repent, and believe in the good news

(for the time is fulfilled and the kingdom of God has come near...)"

There's some kind of life that needs to be relinquished if there's to be a transformed life. - Nannette Sawyer on Mark 9:2-9 for Christian Century.

Repentance: Letting go (unknowing, vulnerable) taking up (

Nitty Gritty of repentance

I want to get away from a definition of repentance that's about feeling bad

Repentance - relinquishing of old life, for the sake of new life (transformed)

Lenten disciplines help us do this

Temptation to not...

For God in Christ is always leading us back to that water, to who we are in light of who God is. There is a new life after an old way has been laid to rest - this is the work of repentance. Scary, messy, and often painful it is, but God in Christ knows the way for us. We listen for the voice, past all temptation to turn aside, and walk in the steadfast love and faithfulness of the one who at the first called us beloved.