

ST. JOHN'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH
COMPASS, PA

February 18, 2024 – FIRST SUNDAY IN LENT, YR. B

The Rev. Dr. Nina George-Hacker

Homily: *"Easter Faith in the Desert of Lent"**

Genesis 9:8-17 (God establishes His covenant with the earth)
Psalm 25:1-9 (A prayer for guidance and forgiveness)
1 Peter 3:18-22 (Christ died for our sins once and for all)
St. Mark 1:9-15 (Jesus is tempted by the devil in the desert)

Welcome to Lent! ... the great fast of the Church year, when we commemorate the time Jesus gave up chocolate for forty days (not counting Sundays). Well, maybe not. According to the Gospel, Jesus spent forty days in the wilderness, fasting and being tempted by Satan; it doesn't say anything about chocolate. You'll notice it doesn't say anything about turning stones into bread either. We're used to hearing this story from the Gospel accounts of St. Matthew or St. Luke, who talk about what Jesus was tempted *with*, although all three evangelists agree on the *identity* of the Tempter.

Since St. Mark's version seems a bit abrupt, I don't want you to feel as though you're missing part of the story, so I'll go ahead and fill it in for you. However, I will be taking quite a bit of liberty with the text and will tell the story somewhat differently than you may have heard it before.

Immediately after Jesus was baptized, the Holy Spirit drove Him out into the wilderness; and He stayed in the wilderness with the wild beasts, fasting, until at the end of forty days, God came to Him.

God said, "My son, are you hungry?" And Jesus said, "Yes." Then God said, "My Son, my beloved Son, if You follow me, then Your body will be broken as bread for the world; but first You must starve."

Then God took Jesus to Jerusalem, up to the highest pinnacle of the Temple, and they looked down at the ground far below them. God said, "My Son, are you afraid for Your life?" And Jesus said, "Yes." Then God said, "My Son, my beloved Son, to follow Me is to leap from this tower—and trust in Me alone—because you cannot be certain angels will catch you as you fall."

Then God took Jesus to a tall mountain, and showed Him all the kingdoms of the world. God said, "My Son, are You angry at the injustices of the world and those who have power?" And Jesus said, "Yes." Then God said, "My Son, my beloved Son, if you follow Me, then You will be placed in the hands of those kings and princes of the earth, and they will destroy You and those You love."

Then God said, "Now, my Son, my beloved Son, knowing all these things, will you follow Me?" And Jesus said, "Yes."

This is the story of Lent, the story of faith in the wilderness, faith that says "Yes" to God, even in the darkness, even in times of pain and fading hope. Each of us has our own personal Lenten season when it seems God has abandoned us, or when God is asking us to bear impossible burdens.

These are the times when our prayers appear to go unanswered, or when the answer comes back bluntly, "No." These are the occasions when we wail, "O God, how could you let this happen?" So, the question we must confront during Lent, and during our own personal Lents, is this: What is the faith to which we can steadfastly cling when we are in the wilderness?

First of all, we can cling to the faith that we are not *alone* in that wilderness. Just as God was with Jesus in that Middle-Eastern desert so long ago, God is with us in south-central Pennsylvania, now. And He *knows*, *understands*, and *feels for* our sadness and suffering. God became man in Jesus, and experienced all the joys and pains of being human. God was cold and hungry. God wept over the death of a friend. God was angry. God prayed in an agony of fear that He might be spared His fate, and His prayer went unanswered. God yelled at the sky, "Why have you forsaken me?" God died and was buried, so that even in death, we are not alone.

There is nowhere in the wilderness that we can go that God is not already there, saying, “Yes, my child. I know this is hard. But come sit with Me, and we will comfort each other.” We hurt, we grieve, but we do not hurt and grieve alone; God also grieves with us.

In addition, we cling to the faith that Lent does not last forever. “To every thing there is a season, and a time for every purpose under heaven,” Scripture reminds us. There is a season for Lent, in the calendar and in our lives; because whether we like it or not, darkness is part of being alive, and we need to spend time in the wilderness. However, the liturgical year reminds us that Lent is only for a time, and then it ends with Easter. Forty days by the calendar; our own Lents may be shorter or longer, but Lent ends as it always does, with Easter, with the joy of the Resurrection, with brightness and flowers and ringing Alleluias.

But first, it is necessary for us to spend some time as Jesus did, in prayer, fasting, and self-denial, so that, just as Our Lord was powerfully filled with the Holy Spirit and equipped for ministry after His time in the desert, we will be, too. This is the season for grieving our sins and selfishness; we need to empty ourselves of our inner darkness, so that we may welcome the bright light of Easter morning. Because, ultimately, the faith we cling to in the wilderness is the faith of Easter, the faith of our baptism, which is faith in the Resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ.

In today’s Old Testament lesson, we heard the story of Noah—how God destroyed the world with a flood, then set a rainbow in the sky to signify the covenant that He would never end the world in that way again. To the ancient Hebrews, the waters of the flood were not just rain. God cracked open the skies and let in the primal waters of *chaos*. But it was over those same waters of chaos that the Spirit moved in Creation, birthing a new world. And so, the waters of destruction are also the waters of creation and of new life. Once again, God takes darkness and chaos, and brings out of it rebirth and light.

Today’s Epistle lesson reminds us that the story of the flood is a symbol of our Baptism, something we tend to forget. Our font may be shallow, but Baptism is deep water; our old lives go under and don’t come back up. Instead, new life emerges. And that is the covenant God made with us at Easter—not that there would be no more floods, not that we would never feel as though we are drowning—but that we, as a new creation, will be born from the waters.

Easter faith means we believe that God redeems death by turning it into new life. Because the story of Lent—the Church’s Lent, our own personal Lenten seasons—is really the story of Easter, it turns out like this:

After three days in the tomb, God came to Jesus, and said, “My Son, my beloved Son, You have starved and bled and died. But if You follow Me, then hunger shall cease, and pain shall end, and even death will be only temporary; and this shall be for You and for all people, forever. And now, my Son, knowing all these things, will you follow Me?” And Jesus said, “Yes.”⁺

May God give us the grace to say “Yes” to Him, too, as we journey through Lent with Jesus.

Amen.

⁺ Adapt. N. George-Hacker, “Easter Faith Will Carry us Through Lent,” 22 February 2015, St. Christopher’s Episcopal Church, Cobleskill NY. Used with permission.

⁺ Adapt. Ross TenEyck, “Sermon on Mark 1:9-13”, 5 March 2006, [Alumnus.CalTech.edu](http://alumnus.caltech.edu/~teneyck/liturgylent.html) <<http://alumnus.caltech.edu/~teneyck/liturgylent.html>> 20 February 2015.