

Sermon  
The First Sunday in Lent  
Sunday, February 18<sup>th</sup>, 2024  
Church of the Ascension, Ottawa  
The Reverend Victoria Scott

Readings: [GENESIS 9:8-17](#); [PSALM 25:1-9](#); [1 PETER 3:18-22](#); [MARK 1:9-15](#)



It's almost a year ago that my daughter Annabel and I were in the Land of the Holy One on a pilgrimage with Bishop Shane and nearly 30 other pilgrims from across our Diocese. The picture on our screen now is the view from the Wadi Qelt: a gorge running between Jerusalem and Jericho. This is the wilderness of Jesus and John the Baptist.

We hiked up the Wadi Qelt on our first day full day of the pilgrimage. Bishop Shane was infinitely wise in the way that he structured our time. We had this desert experience before we made our way to Jerusalem. That time in the desert – the vast emptiness, the wind, the quiet – made space in us to experience all the energy and emotion of Jerusalem. And after our time in Jerusalem we ended the pilgrimage in Galilee, soaking in the presence of the Risen Christ in that place.

There is a pattern and a rhythm in our lectionary and in our liturgical year. Our church year begins not in January, but in Advent with four weeks of expectation that lead us to Christmas and the Incarnation: the blessed moment God comes to be with us in Jesus. Then it's Epiphany, a season of revelations of God. We ended that season of Epiphany on a mountaintop with the Transfiguration last week, and now we enter into the season of Lent, moving toward Jesus's suffering and death. On this side of the Resurrection, we know that this suffering and death is not the end! There is transformation in that suffering and in the crucifixion. There is Resurrection. The world is infused with the Risen Christ. There is the Spirit at Pentecost, and the season after Pentecost takes us through Jesus's earthly ministry, bringing us back to Advent again. We're meant to notice this pattern, this rhythm. We're meant to feel it...

Just as we began our pilgrimage in the desert, we begin our Lenten journey, each year, in the wilderness. We're in Year B in our three-year lectionary, which means that we hear of Jesus's wilderness experience from Mark's Gospel. In Years A and C we hear from Matthew and Luke. Mark offers us a particular entry into this wilderness time: the way it begins was important for Jesus, and it's important for us.

We've just heard that Jesus was baptized, and he came up out of the water and saw the heavens torn apart. He saw the Spirit descending like a dove, and he heard God's voice telling him "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." Then we hear that the Spirit *immediately* drove him out into the wilderness. Jesus made his way into the desert with his hair still wet, and with God's words of love and affirmation echoing in his ears. Those words of beloved-ness are for all of us. To borrow the title of one of Jan Richardson's blessings: Beloved is Where We Begin. We are all invited into the wilderness remembering the waters of our baptism, and with God's words of love and affirmation for each one of us echoing in our hearts and souls and minds.

Frederik Beuchner says this about the purpose and meaning of Lent:

"In many cultures there is an ancient custom of giving a tenth of each year's income to some holy use. For Christians, to observe the forty days of Lent is to do the same thing with roughly a tenth of each year's days. After being baptized by John in the

river Jordan, Jesus went off alone into the wilderness where he spent forty days asking himself the question what it meant to be Jesus. During Lent, Christians are supposed to ask one way or another, what it means to be themselves.”

Each Lent we are invited into intentional practices such as fasting and almsgiving. We’re invited to think about penitence and repentance. Fasting and almsgiving and penitence and repentance aren’t empty actions. These actions are not about proving ourselves to God, or to others. We do these things to strip away the things that get in the way of accepting and flourishing in that relationship of being known and loved by God. We do these things to make space in our hearts and minds and souls to let go of fear and doubt, and to ground ourselves in trusting God. We do these things to help us to get to know ourselves.

Our passage from Genesis shows us not a distant God, but one of covenant, of promise. God with us, for us. We hear in the First Letter of Peter that Christ suffered to “...bring us to God”. This is a drawing into relationship. Being beloved by God is relational. The Spirit drives Jesus into the desert, where he is tested, but in that testing he is not alone – we hear that angels waited on him – this too is relational. After John is arrested, Jesus makes his way to Galilee proclaiming the good news of God and saying “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near...”. The time is fulfilled and the kingdom of God has come near. This is not future, but present. Our relationship with God is not distant, not future, but now. There is an invitation in this for us to mark our Lenten days by making space for God. By making space to listen and see and feel God now. Now, not when we can “do better”, not when we have made enough changes, not when we have found a different time and place and space, but now.

We are meant know ourselves as beloved by God. That is where we begin. This relationship of being loved and loving God is not meant to happen in a vacuum, in isolation. Our relationship with God is mediated – lived out – in this world through relationships with others and with all of creation. We are meant, as followers of Jesus to live our lives the way he did: in community, in friendship with the poor, the vulnerable and the marginalized, seeking healing and wholeness for all of creation, and choosing the power of love over love of power. Lent is a time for us to ask what it means to be ourselves – in relationship with God, and others – in this world. What does that look like? It’s a time for us to ask ourselves: What are we becoming? What are we failing to become?

Several years ago now, at a Diocesan Synod, our guest speaker, Richard LeSeuer offered “Four Rules of the Desert” as a way of thinking about being the church. I’d go so far as to say that they offer us a way to get to know ourselves, and to be our best selves on this life’s journey. These rules are:

(1) Don’t go alone; (2) Take only what you can carry; (3) Expect anxiety (the challenge is to stay); and (4) Wait for the Lord.

Don’t go alone. We are made for relationship and for community. We are not meant to go through this life alone. We can find that community in different places, but I certainly give thanks for this community here at Ascension.

Take only what you can carry. We can’t carry the burdens of guilt and shame and anger and hostility and resentment *and* carry the good news of God’s love. We’ve got to put something down – Jesus invites us to put down our burdens. God invites us to know ourselves as beloved – no matter what.

Expect anxiety. This work of getting to know ourselves and how we are to be in the world. This work of being God’s good news in the midst of suffering and chaos, in the midst of the brokenness of our society, of our world. It’s hard work. We’re not wrong to feel anxious, but we need to remember that God is with us – loving us – in all of it.

And the last rule: wait for the Lord. I sometimes struggle with the idea of waiting as being too passive. When we wait for the Lord, we are not standing still, waiting for God’s love and presence to arrive. We are waiting to feel that presence. Waiting to hear a whisper on our way through the struggles and anxiety and chaos of this world in all its brokenness.

We are entering a wilderness time, together, as we begin this season of Lent. We are entering a time of listening, and making space. Ask yourself this Lent: What am I becoming? What am I failing to become? Remember these four rules of the desert that I have shared. When you feel anxious, remember that you are not alone: God is with you, and we are with each other. Remember to take only what you can carry: put your burdens down, and carry the good news of God’s love with you.

Remember to wait for the Lord – not for God to arrive, not for a better time or place or a better you – but wait, in stillness and quiet, in this wilderness of Lent for a whisper, a feeling, of God’s presence with you. May you feel that presence in this place this morning. May you feel it through these Lenten days, and may it sustain you in all your days. In Jesus name. Amen.