

Finding Strength through our Wildernesses

A Sermon for the First Sunday in Lent
Church of the Epiphany, Richmond, Virginia

Year C – February 14, 2016

David H. Knight, Interim Rector

*(Now) through these days of penitence,
and through thy Passiontide,
yea ever-more, in life and death,
Jesus! With us abide.*

Hymn 142 3rd stanza

It is hard to believe Lent is already upon us. It seems that only recently we had begun Advent. Both Advent and Lent are seasons of preparation. In Advent we prepare for the birth of a baby, the Christ Child. Now in Lent, we prepare for Christ's passion and death on the cross. The absence of Alleluias in our liturgy and music symbolize the penitential nature of this season. It is a preparation, a journey in which the Church invites us to travel faithfully if we are to experience the power and the joy of the Resurrection at Easter. This season for you and me is intended to provide a spiritual depth and power for our journey that comes to us as you and I respond in faith to the trials we face, its temptations and the testing that comes our along our path.

As we begin this season of Lent, I would invite us for a moment to look ahead some weeks to the Liturgy for Palm Sunday. During the liturgy for Palm Sunday, when the Great Procession halts momentarily, there is read what is called the Station Collect. It's also the collect for Monday in Holy week, and it is included in Daily Morning Prayer as A Collect for Fridays. If you will turn for a moment in your Prayer Books to page 272: at the top of the page is this station collect. I would invite us to read this collect together:

“Almighty God, whose most dear son went not up to joy but first he suffered pain, and entered not into glory before he was crucified: Mercifully grant that we, walking in the way of the cross, may find it none other than the way of life and peace; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.”

Almighty God, whose dear son went not up to joy, but first he suffered pain, and entered not into glory before he was crucified... Praying this collect reminds us that Jesus was to suffer at the hands of sinful people before he went up to joy. He was to be killed in an act of cruel violence before he would enter into glory. As you and I pray these words we ask for the strength that we may walk in the way of the cross with him, and that you and I may ultimately find it to be a

source of life and peace in our lives. You might want to keep this collect before you as you travel each day along your journey this Lent.

We have just heard in this morning's gospel reading how Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from his baptism in the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness where for forty days he was tempted by the devil. As Jesus was in the wilderness in the desert tempted by the devil, so you and I too face those times when we find ourselves in a wilderness of some kind. The wilderness we experience can take many forms as can the temptations that confront us. This season of Lent is a time for us to accept the invitation to the observance of a holy Lent, by self-examination and repentance, by prayer, fasting, and self-denial, and by reading and meditation on God's holy Word. By repentance we mean among other things, making a U-turn that lead us in a new and better direction for us to follow.

The practice and discipline of giving something up can have a significant impact especially if, at the end of Lent, we discover we no longer need what we have given up. We come to find that we can best live without it. It could be, for example, a habit or a way of thinking that has not been helpful to us or to those around us. For you and me, observing a holy Lent by self examination and repentance, by prayer and fasting and self denial, can bring us to Easter all the stronger to face life with all it brings to us along our path.

Almighty God, whose dear son went not up to joy, but first he suffered pain, and entered not into glory before he was crucified...

"But," you say, "what to give up?" You and I, no doubt can come up with what for each of us might be something well worth giving up. I have a long-time friend who speaks of what he calls "cherished resentments." Think about it, how often do you and I carry resentments and find that we put a lot of energy into nurturing that resentment. We simply won't let it go. That resentment begins to take on a life of its own. Sooner or later it begins to take its toll on us.

There is a documented story in a medical journal I read some years ago of what happened to a woman who was a passenger on a TWA flight that was hijacked. (That it was a TWA flight dates it sometime prior to 2001) I don't remember what journal it was yet the impact of the story described in the article is forever etched in my memory. Apparently, the aircraft was on the tarmac at the airport and the hijackers were making demands. And when the demands were not met, they would kill a passenger, and another passenger, and then another. This woman, who was shot and seriously injured but still alive, was assumed by the hijackers to be dead. She decided to lie in the aisle as if indeed she were dead so that they might not harm her further. Finally the hijackers were overtaken by the authorities. The remaining hostages on the plane were rescued including this woman who was seriously injured. She would, as a result of her injuries, come to spend a long time in hospitals recovering from her wounds. She underwent

numerous surgeries but the chronic pain from her injuries would not leave her. Treatment at one pain clinic after another had no lasting effect. Several years later, however, something was to occur in her life. It had so happened that ever since she had been wounded that day on that plane, she had harbored bitter resentment toward the hijackers who had caused her injuries and had killed others. Her resentment ran deep and for a very long time, but then, one day she came to a realization. She began to realize that these hijackers were still holding her hostage even though they had been jailed or possibly executed and were no longer a physical threat to anyone. What they had done to her still had power over her life to the extent that her physical pain had left her virtually immobilized. She came, by the grace of God, to a decision. Her decision was that she would forgive her assailants for what they had done. That didn't mean that she was saying that what they had done was of no consequence, that it was not an evil act of violence which it still was, or, that it didn't matter. Her forgiveness allowed her to let go of her cherished resentment. She no longer held her assailants responsible for what her life was like now. After she came to that place in her journey, something began to happen. Within a relatively short period of time, her physical pain began to subside. Not long thereafter, she became virtually pain free. Giving up a cherished resentment would come to give her new life. It could be said that for all that time that she so tenaciously held on to her resentment, this woman lived in a wilderness, but then the time would come when the angels ministered to her in that wilderness. We read in the psalm this morning, "For he shall give his angels charge over you." Her repentance took the form of turning and letting go of that resentment.

We think of Jesus in his wilderness in the desert. The Spirit did not simply drop him off in the wilderness to fend for himself. The Spirit remained with him, allowing him to grow stronger through his time in that wilderness. In the same way, the Spirit does not drop you and me off in the wilderness. God promises to be with each of us when you and I are in those wildernesses in which we find ourselves.

As you and I make our journey through Lent again this year, what might it be for you and for me that by self-examination and repentance, we might seek the strength to let go? Might it be some cherished resentment? Might it be something else? This Lent, it could be a very real blessing for us to be ever mindful that as God was with Jesus in the Wilderness, so God is with you, and with me, in our times of wilderness. As you and I become more and more open to the grace of God, we will encounter in our journey a faithful God, a God who not only is with you and me as we enter into the wilderness, but also is with us throughout our days in that wilderness or wherever we might be.

*Christ be with me, Christ within me,
Christ behind me, Christ before me,
Christ beside me, Christ to win me,
Christ to comfort and restore me.*

Almighty God, whose most dear son went not up to joy but first he suffered pain, and entered not into glory before he was crucified: Mercifully grant that we, walking in the way of the cross, may find it none other than the way of life and peace; through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*