

Fully Prepared

First Sunday in Lent – Mark 1:9-13

preached by the Rector at St. Paul's, Henderson February 29, 2012

Lord, take my eyes and see through them. Take my lips and speak through them. Take my soul and set it on fire with love for thee. Amen.

When I first looked at the Gospel text for today, I said, “Hey, didn’t we do this one already?” Here it is the First Sunday in Lent and what do we have for the Gospel lesson? The baptism of Jesus. After this many times through the Lectionary, my moment of confusion was short-lived. I know full well that the Feast of the Baptism of Our Lord is the first Sunday after *Epiphany*, not the first Sunday in Lent. The Gospel text for that Sunday was verses seven through eleven of the first chapter of Mark, actually overlapping the text for this morning. But on second reading, and on the third, and the fourth, and so on, the differences between this morning’s text and that for the Feast of the Baptism became more and more pronounced. The story of Jesus’ baptism as read at the beginning of the season of Epiphany is one of revelation and light and glory. It ends with the Spirit descending in the form of a dove and a voice booming from heaven, “Thou art my beloved Son; with thee I am well pleased.”

But... that’s *not* where today’s Gospel ends, is it? Today we *start* with that same triumphant scene of revelation— but today’s text continues a very significant bit beyond that. Today we go from the shaded banks and cool water of the Jordan, to the dryness and the dust and the desolation of the desert. We may have come round to some of the same *text* as the First Sunday after Epiphany. But this is Lent. The flowers are gone from behind the altar. The growing green of Epiphany has been traded for penitential purple. The last “Alleluia” has been sounded until Easter. We find ourselves in what for many of us is the desert of the Church year. And the *story* told by this portion of this very familiar text is a different one from the the Feast of the Baptism altogether.

You see, like the desert into which Jesus was driven by the Spirit, Lent is a time of testing, a time of trial. It is a time for us to look a bit more deeply into our own heart – to reconsider our lives, to reexamine our relationships to Christ, to look for the truth which we are so good at hiding from others... and from ourselves. It is a time to seek out those _____, dark corners where we hide our pride and our prejudices, our lies and our conceits, our petty hatreds – and our not-so-petty ones, too. It is a time to route out all those horrid habits of our heart that are responsible for the misery we bring into our own lives, all those trespasses that are responsible for the grief we have brought into the lives of those dear to us, all those *sins* that are responsible for the crown of thorns on our dear Savior’s head, for the nails in his hands, for the spear that pierced his heart for the sake of ours.

But if Lent is such a desolate journey – how in this world are we to *survive*?

Most of you know by now that I was an Army officer before going to seminary. Unless you were here to hear my Ash Wednesday homily, some of you might *not* be aware that my entrance into seminary was delayed because of my involvement in what is now commonly called the *First Gulf War*.

I’m told that in the vast expanse of the Euphrates Valley and the Arabian Peninsula, there are parts that are really quite lovely. The part of it in which I spent most of my time, however, the area around the little town of Rahfa, Saudi Arabia, was *not* one of those beautiful places. Rahfa is a flat, rocky, dry and dusty place, often with no vegetation as far as the eye can see – with the exception, apparently, of the occasional dried-up palm tree. Although there is a small permanent population of merchants, most of the people in and around Rahfa are Bedouin, members of one or another of the nomadic groups that move around the desert with their sheep and their goats in search of whatever infinitesimal patch of green they can find. These people have little use for nations or their arbitrary borders, so their knowledge of the area was every bit as valuable as any map.

On the eve of the Gulf War, there was a member of one of these Bedouin groups working with the planning group of the XVIIIth Airborne Corps. At one point our group was considering whether we could lighten the load of the forces that would be moving north by including a stop at a hidden water source deep in the Iraqi desert that our Bedouin friend had told us about. Our friend advised against such a move, however: "You never begin a trip through the desert," he cautioned, "without having enough water to *finish* the journey." "You cannot think that you will find what you need in the desert, you must bring everything *with* you." "You must only enter into the desert," he concluded, "fully prepared."

Friends, the desert of Lent is not *any* different. We must begin this journey fully prepared with the strength and sustenance that we will need to carry us through to the end. Those responsible for the Lectionary have followed the Gospel writer in taking great care to make sure that in this morning's lesson for the beginning of Lent, two points are intimately connected. Before Jesus was driven into the desert, before he entered into his period of trial, before he faced the dryness and the hunger, the dangers of the wild beasts, and the temptation of evil incarnate – Jesus was baptized – he received the grace and the comfort and the *power* of the Holy Spirit.

God asks no more than this of each of us. For in the sacrament of baptism, each of us is given the self-same grace. Each of us is given the self-same comfort. Each of us is given the self-same *power*. The water we carry into the desert of Lent is none other than the water of *baptism* that unites us to Christ himself. The strength that will carry us through the desert of Lent, the sustenance that will bring us to drink at the hidden wells that are there to refresh us, the power that will bring us to the glorious morn of Easter, is the Holy Spirit of God that was given to each of us at baptism.

As you and I enter this period of Lent, as we are reminded of the forty days of Jesus's desert trial, as we begin our own journey, as we examine our hearts and prepare ourselves to participate with Christ in his passion and death – and in his resurrection, as we begin this sacred season, we would do well to remember once again, to remember over and over and over, to remember with each step we take – that we *are* baptized. Here once again on the banks of the Jordan, here just on the edge of wilderness historical and spiritual, it is important to remember that in joining ourselves to Jesus Christ in his baptism and in ours, that we are given everything, every strength, every comfort, every power that we need to complete our journey home. God has supplied us with *everything* we need to withstand this and every trial. You and I are members of the body of Christ. We have been filled with the *power* of the Holy Spirit. We are fully equipped for the journey through the wilderness – and for the promise that awaits us at its joyful end.