

Sermon Lent 1 B

James Russell Lowell wrote the poem, "Once to every man and nation comes the moment to decide..." On Friday, I watched a beautiful U-tube rendering of the song by teenagers. Back in 1986 Mike and I had to decide if we would leave our home in Northern Ireland and with our three children venture to the US. That was a big decision moment. It was not the first relocation decision we made. Two years after we married, we made the decision to leave England and go to Northern Ireland for jobs. At that time Northern Ireland was in turmoil and would stay that way all the 16 years we lived there. But in both cases, there was a moment when we made the decision, "yes we will go."

What about you? Can you remember making momentous decisions for yourself and/or for your family? I am asking this because it seems Jesus did so on the day our Gospel began its focus. Jesus had not done any ministry before this special day, so we understand, yet was aware John the Baptist was knee deep, or maybe waist high deep in water depending how deep the Jordan was, in which he Baptized each person. It seems people throughout the whole region had gone to John, gone to confess their sins and then were Baptized, maybe as a sign of absolution.

So something in Jesus heart and mind urged him to present himself before John that day. His Baptism allowed him to hear God 's message coming from the heavens which were "torn apart." The message must have been so uplifting for him: "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." I am sure if you heard the voice of God addressing you would be pleased for yourself, no doubt celebrating afterwards, but no, Jesus still dripping wet from the Jordan was immediately driven away into the wilderness. It seems such an anti-climax, if ever there was one. We have no details here of what happened in the wilderness, which seems to make sense as no one was there with Jesus anyway. However, we know he had temptations that kept running through his heart and mind. He was alone. That wilderness was vast, empty, unfriendly. The silence would have been broken by animal noises; were the animals wild, were they dangerous? Where were they? It seems they were there, but Jesus was in God's care, angels waited on him. Jesus needed to be there; God wanted him to spend this time alone, in prayer, very vulnerable but in God's care. He had to rely completely on God for his care, safety, and company. Did he enjoy it? We do not know but God knew Jesus needed that time alone to prepare for his ministry. He has to face temptations to be other than the person God created him to be.

Temptations came to Jesus. In Matthew and Luke's Gospel we read the details. Here we just know Jesus was tempted. He could have been the sort of Messiah the people yearned for; a military leader who would lead the nation to victory over Rome. But God showed Jesus he was to be among them as one who served, as one who showed them the love of God and not violence and not to impress them by forceful leadership. Jesus stayed there for those 40 days and nights: a very long time to be alone. He had no cell phone, lap top, other people to communicate with. He had just the presence of God constantly with him.

The scriptures tell us about many people in the wilderness, all aware of God's presence. Adam and Eve, were turned out of the garden of Eden into inhospitable territory. They had to rely on God, their son, Cain, did too. Abraham journeyed hundreds of miles, much in wilderness territory, until he came to a place to live. Noah, as we heard, was in a watery wilderness, certainly not alone, but had to rely on God for his well-being. Moses and the Israelites spent 40 years wandering in the wilderness before they (at least their children) entered the Promise Land. The apostle Paul spent three years in

Arabia and then another 14 years in preparation for his missionary work, as he wrote in his letter to the Galatians.

What has been your wilderness experience? Has covid been like a wilderness time for you? Have you been in some sort of a wilderness many times? Have you found yourself alone and troubled with no one to turn to? Did you then realize God was with you and had been there all the time? But were you aware of the importance of that time? Did you learn from it? If so, what did you learn about yourself?

When I was in Minneapolis, I was alone most of the time. Although I loved all the ministries I did, and I loved the people at the cathedral I was still living alone. It felt like a wilderness time, but I knew it to be one of learning and a time when I was very much dependent on God.

We know that this time for Jesus did prepare him for his ministry. We heard from today's Gospel that afterwards he marched into Galilee and proclaimed the time was fulfilled, I understand him to mean his time for ministry was to begin, and that the kingdom of God had come near, and they were to repent and believe the good news.

"They were to repent" Jesus said. This past week I reread part of the book by Pastor Jim Wallis on repentance. In it he shared this story, about the two days he spent in Spokane, Washington. He had gone to speak at Whitworth University and then on the next day to moderate an event hosted by a local church. At the event, many young people came, street kids from an area where there was growing crime. People had become afraid in the city and there were hopes the event could be helpful in some way. In fact, many leaders, from the community, education, business, police, pastors, and concerned citizens showed up. The youth had a turn to speak and share. One young man said his mother was a drug addict and their welfare check would be spent in a few days. His work was needed to support his siblings and himself. As McDonald's did not pay enough, he had become a drug dealer and was now supporting a lot of people. Another said he wanted to attend college but had no money so joined a gang but kept on studying on his own, A young woman told how she has been sexually abused by her stepfather and had run away and joined a gang for protection. She was then a gang girl. The stories went on, as though the youth represented a huge wilderness full of lost people. But then the focus was on what those at the meeting could do to help. Several spoke up, for example a business owner offered jobs, the university president offered free university tuition for those with high school diploma or a GED and a pastor offered study space in his church. Then a lady spoke up, "I am not a university president, I don't own a business and I'm not a pastor of a church. But I work at McDonald's right downtown and I get a 15-minute break in the morning and in the afternoon. Some of you said you don't ever have anyone to talk to. Well come by McDonald's and I will talk to you and even buy you a Big Mac.?"

What an amazing story of how people listened to one another and then spoke up as to what each could do to make a difference. Each person was repenting. They were remorseful for their previous lack of action and wanted to offer ways to help remedy the problem. Each offered what they could do, their part in the restoration of a community which had become full of violence and hate but did not support its members. This story does not need to belong only to Spokane Washington but could be, and can be anywhere, everywhere.

I invite you to think, what you can do to make a difference; do not be tempted to say you cannot do anything, just to say, "What can I do and where can I do it and when can I do it?"

Today you have seen Jesus in many different ways. He made the momentous decision that it was The Day to begin his ministry. He heard God's affirmation of him but instead of basking in those beautiful words immediately he headed off to spend time alone with God. He heard all the temptations entering his mind and heart and pushed them aside. Then when he was done with those temptations and ready to begin his ministry, he plunged right in. He would be making a difference in the lives of everyone he connected with for the rest of his life.

A lot to think about as you are starting your Lent journey. Temptations will come to you often but know that God will help you deal with them. Let me close with words from writer Carl Dew,

Till all the jails are empty and all the bellies filled

Till no one hurts or steals or lies and no more blood is spilled

Till age and race and gender no longer separate

Till pulpit, press and politics are free of greed and hate

God has work for us to do.

Yes, God has work for you to do, today tomorrow and every tomorrow. And God has promised you will never be alone, God will always be with you. Amen