

First Weekend in Lent (C/RCL)

Luke 4:1-13

March 9-10, 2019

Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Manasquan, NJ

I was fine with it, but Pastor Mark... well, not so much. The suggestion from Sr. Margo, the coordinator of our February trip to Holy Island, was that our group eat supper in silence one night, not speak throughout the evening, and wait till the next morning to open the floodgates of conversation. I figured the charades we'd have to play during dinner to get someone to pass the potatoes or the salt & pepper would be interesting. Then I was going to be reading before bed, anyway, so silence helps me concentrate.

To be fair, though, I've visited and eaten with Sr. Margo's Community of St. John Baptist up in Mendham, so I've dined in silence before. The sisters do it all the time, except on Sundays and feast days. The whole concept was new and foreign to Mark. Sr. Margo's reasoning was that we were all on a very loosely scheduled retreat and this would be a spiritual opportunity to listen for the still, small voice of God in a place seasoned with 1400 years of prayer.

In 635 A.D. the Irish monk Aidan and some fellow monks moved from the Scottish island of Iona to Lindisfarne, the Holy Island, at the invitation of King Oswald. They were to sow the seeds of Christianity there in northern Britain. They chose Lindisfarne because it is right across the water from the king's fortress at Bamburgh, which would provide protection, and because Lindisfarne is only accessible at low tide, which would provide a certain amount of seclusion, appealing for the monastic life. 1,400 years later one can still reach the Holy Island by foot (or car) only at low tide. The shop hours change daily and are tied to the tide charts, since most of the customers are day trippers who drive over and

either have to leave before high tide or spend the night. Last year a couple hundred thousand people visited Lindisfarne, but only about 180 people live there. It becomes a bit of a ghost town once the tide comes in. So Sr. Margo's thought was that for one evening we should let the tide govern us and allow silence to come in along with high tide, hopefully bringing us into closer conversation with God, inspiring us prayerfully to be on "receive" and not just "send."

Jesus' 40 day wilderness experience in today's Gospel was in a barren, dry place, unlike Lindisfarne. And there weren't 180 neighbors in the near vicinity; all the company He had was the devil. St. Luke tells us that Jesus, who had just been baptized, was **filled by** the Holy Spirit and **led into** the wilderness by the Holy Spirit. That time apart was preparation for ministry to come. During the three years of ministry that followed, Jesus regularly took off by Himself to commune with His Father in heaven. He invited His disciples to do the same: "Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest awhile." (Mark 6:31) Physical rest and the spiritual refreshment of prayer go hand in hand.

How many times have we thought or said, "I just want to get away from it all!"? But I think there's also a part of us that resists going into the wilderness, the quiet place without distractions, the empty place that's filled only with God. I think our temptation, at least sometimes, is to avoid that place at all costs.

Maybe we fear that if all the chaotic voices around us and inside us are silenced, we'll hear words of condemnation. That the voice from on high will sound like Mufasa's angry, challenging voice thundering at Simba from the heavens: "You are more than you have become." All of us, at various points in our lives, invest energy in ignoring or justifying our shortcomings, our failures in love. Some people deaden the voice of

conscience with drugs or alcohol, or with excessive amounts of work or play. We're tempted to drown out the little voice inside that channels the Spirit and tells the stark truth without pulling any punches: "La la la la la la la, I can't HEAR you!!" We don't want to hear that what we're doing is wrong, we don't want to hear about what we **should** be doing but aren't, because we don't want to change. Even if what we're doing is harming us, killing us, physically or emotionally or spiritually, even if what we're doing is damaging our most important relationships, wounding or deadening our soul, we don't want to change.

Rather than saying we might hear **condemnation** in the wilderness, though, I'd rather say we can expect **confrontation**. "Condemnation" sounds like a straight one-way ticket to hell. "Confrontation" is an up-close-and-personal encounter with our Lord, hearing the sometimes-ugly-but also-liberating truth about ourselves that the Holy Spirit unveils. Remember when Nathan told King David the story of a rich man who stole a poor man's pet lamb and slaughtered it for his dinner? David said the man should die! And Nathan said, "You **are** that man!" (2 Samuel 12:7). After all, David had taken Uriah's wife Bathsheba and arranged for Uriah to be killed in battle. That **confrontation** led to David's **confession** of sin and then the **consolation** of forgiveness. Our friends and family in twelve-step programs know how **necessary**, how **important**, how **therapeutic** it is to recognize the soul-searing truth about our flawed, wounded selves, if we ever want to be healed.

Easter Sunday is going to arrive on April 21st regardless of whether we allow ourselves any wilderness time in prayer, any additional time in worship, whether we expend any spiritual effort between now and then to let this Lent be the intended "springtime of the soul." But wouldn't it be nice if **we** change in the meantime, and not just

the page on the calendar? If we invite the Spirit to speak to our hearts, to give us grace to leave behind what hobbles us, demeans us, and give us strength to lay hold of what will free and enrich us?

Let me just offer the reminder that sometimes **prayer** is simply **being in the Presence** (of God) in silence.... 1400 years ago Aidan and his fellow monks followed a rhythm of work and prayer, play and rest, silence and speech. We need that, too. We suffer when our lives are so busy there's no time for soul refreshment. Our families suffer, too. Whatever our vocation, our God-given calling is, it will flourish all the more if we can step away to a quiet place and pray. The time apart draws us closer to our Lord, and we are, after all, like spokes on a wheel, that come closer to each other as they approach the hub. May we find a holy rhythm this Lent, as we hear in this prayer of St. Aidan. May the sea, our close companion, be our reminder of the divine, lifegiving ebb and flow of a holy life, available to each of us:

*Leave me alone with God as much as may be.
As the tide draws the water close in upon the shore,
Make me an island, set apart,
Alone with you, God, holy to you.*

*Then with the turning of the tide
Prepare me to carry your presence to the busy world beyond,
The world that rushes in on me,
Till the waters come again and fold me back to you.*

Attributed to St. Aidan of Lindisfarne

Amen.

Pastor Mary Virginia Farnham