

Sermon, Father William J. Albinger

Sunday February 21, 2010

Lent 1C 2010

(Sermon delivered from notes – this is a recreation):

In the name of our one living God – ever creating, ever loving, ever sustaining: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Last Wednesday was Ash Wednesday when we started our observance of Lent. Traditionally, it is a period of penitence, of self-reflection, self-denial, giving up things. But sometimes we get so focused on what we are doing for Lent (or on what we are not doing that we intended to do) that we forget why we do Lent in the first place.

At this beginning point, I think it is important to remember the lessons we just read during the Epiphany Season: the baptism of Jesus in the Jordan, the miracle at the wedding in Cana, the abundant catch of fish by Peter and the other first disciples and, finally, the Transfiguration. All these accounts are intended to attest to God's presence manifest in the person of Jesus.

But now we are down from that mountaintop and back in the real world that can be cruel and dangerous. Another hill comes into view – the one just outside the walls of Jerusalem that is called Golgotha or Calvary. But, remember, Lent isn't to prepare us for Good Friday. No! Lent is to prepare us for Easter. Lent is meant us to help us see through the cross of Jesus and the crosses of our own lives and times!

So we rewind the story. Luke, great storyteller that he is, now does a flashback. Jesus has emerged from his Baptismal experience with lots of questions. What does it mean to be called "Son of God"? How does one live into such a calling? What is he meant to do? Who is he really?

Notice he is not driven by these questions into the desert. No! He is led by the Spirit into the desert to do the work he must do to answer his calling. He is called to a time of reflection, of facing doubts and fears. It is a period of testing.

For 40 days he is tempted by the devil. Unlike Mark, Luke spells out the temptations: famished from fasting he is tempted to turn stones into bread; alone and confused he is tempted with the lure of having all power and wealth. Confused and vulnerable he is tempted to vanquish all doubt and obtain absolute certainty by jumping off a building.

Notice that Satan comes as a friend offering things that are not bad in and of themselves. The evil is in the motivation. Satan asks Jesus to conform his identity as Son of God to the world's. He is being egged onto destruction of his identity and thus its annihilation.

Anyone familiar with the Books of Genesis and Exodus would remember that these are the same tests that the Hebrew people faced during their 40 years in the desert. They are the same temptations that led the Northern Kingdom of Israel and the Southern Kingdom of Judea astray during the times of the Prophets.

The lesson is all about priorities and the source of real power. It tells a great biblical truth: Yes, we live in an uncertain world that is indeed at times very dangerous. In such a world, our ultimate security is in a loving God who creates, provides, saves and protects. Satan attempts to talk Jesus out of this security by offering other, fake, modes of well-being. They are the usual suspects: love of comfort and possessions, power, and control.

Today's Gospel lesson is all about priorities and power. Where can we look with confidence? For the most part, today's society interprets all of life apart from a covenantal relationship with God our Creator. We are told we are on our own and are offered what I call magical thinking – a false sense of certainty righteousness and being in control and accountable only to ourselves and our own self-interest. If that sounds harsh, it is. Individually and collectively we are prone to seek security through coercion – be it armaments, financial power or political pow-

er. This even seeps into our religious life as some preach the ‘prosperity gospel’ and others seek political power to coerce others into conformity with their particular beliefs.

Today’s abundance offers greater temptation than times of scarcity and hardship. It’s when things are good and we congratulate ourselves for having done it all on our own that we are most prone to get into trouble. That was true in Biblical times and it is true today. It is when things are going smoothly that we get careless, spend too much and pile on the debt.

Lent is time to take stock. Where do our priorities lie? What do we really value? In what do we trust?

Lent is time to go into our internal deserts. The desert is a wilderness – but a beautiful one. It is not God-forsaken nor does it belong to the devil. We find two things there – God is there as God is everywhere and without distractions we find ourselves. The Holy Spirit is there to guide us in the wilderness and help us find our true identity and our true calling. So let’s keep on this faithful path for another 37 days.

Amen.