

Lent 1 “The Vision Quest of Jesus: A Lesson for a Holy Lent”

The Rev. Dr. Howard Anderson

In the Ash Wednesday liturgy we are invited, in the name of the Church, to the observance of a holy Lent, by self-examination and repentance; by prayer, fasting, and self-denial, and by reading and meditating on God’s Holy Word. In today’s gospel we read that Jesus “was led by the Spirit into the wilderness” where he was tempted, where he fasted for 40 days. This was the very first Lent! In Mark’s Gospel, it states that Jesus “was driven into the wilderness.” Maybe its because I am long retired from the parish and have a great deal of time to reflect, that I am finally getting a good read on why the temptation of Jesus in the wilderness feels wrong to me. I discovered decades ago that in virtually all the Biblical commentaries, the writings of theologians and most sermons on these lessons, do not start from an Anglican point of view. They all portray the wilderness into which Jesus goes as a place devoid of good, and place only for Satan and temptation. To the ancient Hebrews, the wild places were to be avoided, they were the places where evil resided. The same was true of how our Hebrew spiritual forebearers saw the sea-a place only of danger, to be avoided. I want to challenge you to remember who we are, and where we are, as we prepare for a holy Lent. We are North American Christians, who as Episcopalians, from the very

beginning of our Celtic and Anglican traditions, actually believe what Genesis says- that all God made was good...well, except for us humans, (and most folks get the answer wrong in my experience) we humans it turns out, are “very good.” We, each one of us, human and other than human, were created for joy out of love. And what God creates out of love, God loves throughout all eternity.

How could Christianity have gotten it so wrong with the “be fruitful and multiply and subdue the earth” idea. The Hebrew actually does not say subdue, but more like “be stewards” of the earth. Today’s reading from Deuteronomy makes that clear. The land given to the Children of Israel, the land of milk and honey, belonged to God just as the land of walleye and wild rice do. The first fruits were to be given to God, the owner. WE are but the stewards. Anglicanism, our tradition, draws deeply from the well of the Celtic tradition, were the incarnation is God taking human form in Jesus to know us more intimately, and in doing so, and in Christ’s sacrifice, we are told in scripture, all creation is redeemed. But our society surely doesn’t act like all creation is sacred. We have driven our Mother the Earth nearly to wholesale destruction in search of squeezing ever dollar we can from her bounty, and acting nothing like the stewards we are called by God to be. If we need proof that many still see wilderness wrongly, think of the recent slaughter of 20 wolves who strayed a bit outside of Yellowstone onto public lands

in Montana. Wolves, for me, the symbol of the wild, are seen as dangerous, with our fairy tales full of big bad wolves.

So let's throw out the ancient Middle Eastern business of wilderness being a bad place. Let's throw out too, all the theologians and preachers who could not remember that scripture tells us that nothing that God made is unclean. It might take us awhile. After all, God had to tell Peter this three times in Acts 10.

We Minnesotans, in my experience, love the wilderness. We cherish our lakes and rivers, our vast prairies and our deep forests. We go to the wilderness for exactly the same reasons Jesus went to the Judean desert. We go, as Annie Dillard wrote decades ago, in her wonderful book, *Teaching a Stone to Talk*, "At a certain point you say to the woods, the lakes, to the mountains, the world, Now I am ready. Now I will stop and be wholly attentive. You empty yourself and wait, listening. After a time you hear...a single chorused note everywhere the same. This is it: the hum of silence...The silence is all there is. It is God's brooding over the face of the waters; it is the blended note of ten thousand created things, the whine of wings. You take a step in the right direction to pray to this silence, and even address the prayer to the world. Distinctions blur. Quit your tents. Pray without ceasing! "

I think Dillard gave us a call to a holy Lent in a North American key, a key Minnesota Episcopalians sing in beautifully. So let's quit our tents and pray without ceasing! Let's silence the monkey mind that afflicts us. Let's put away our phones and computers and walk away this Lent from the rat race of life. One of my favorite "theologians" in the comedienne, Lily Tomlin. She says "the trouble with this rat race of a life we are living, is that even when you are winning, you are still a rat." Brother David Stendal-Rast wrote years ago, we need to remember that the two Chinese characters for busyness, are Heart and killing.

So I think we should think less about the Spirit leading Jesus into his 40 days in the wilderness only to be tempted, but also to get away from the busyness which was threatening to kill his heart, preventing him from knowing what The Holy One would have him do and be. I believe that Jesus went, to enter the silence because Jesus needed to go to the wilderness, where, as Elizabeth Barrett Browning wrote, it is far easier to know that "Earth is crammed with heaven, and every bush is aflame with the glory of God. But only those who take off their shoes; the rest just pick the berries." Jesus needed to take off his shoes and to the wilderness because that is where for millennia people go to find out, or to find again, who God is calling us to be.

And we have a resource about how to keep the kind of holy Lent that Jesus did, that is unparalleled. The Dakota and Ojibwe Episcopalians can tell us. It is what the Dakota call the Hombidaycea, the “crying for a vision,” the vision quest. That is the kind of Lent where I found I could not hide from God’s vision for me. I was privileged to go into the wilderness in the Black Hills on vision quest with a Lakota medicine man for the four year cycle which is required to be a carrier of the Sacred Pipe. It was then I understood far more deeply some of what Jesus experienced in the desert, yes, privation without food and water. Yes, frightened at the sounds of the night, and the darkness of my own soul. Yes, shivering in the cold, yes, tempted to quit and leave the sacred circle where I stood. But exactly as in today’s Psalm 91 reminds us, I was assured that if I made the God my refuge, the angels would have charge of me in the sacred circle. Praying and singing almost without ceasing, the vision of who I was called to be, came, just as it did for Jesus. I had been told by my parish that they thought I might be called to priesthood. That is not what I wanted to hear. Clearly, Jesus did not seek to be the Messiah. Certainly did not want to be called to dying an agonizing death on the Cross. But the vision one receives on the vision quest, both His and mine, is a vision that comes into the human heart. We flee from it at our peril. The true

wilderness that Jesus entered into was his very human heart. That should be the goal of all of us in Lent, to let God's Spirit enter our hearts to guide us in our lives.

And oh yes, Jesus was mightily tempted. He was offered worldly power. "Come on Jesus, test God. Show your stuff," said Satan, urging him to tempt God. Jesus was offered all the Kingdoms of the earth. He could be the Prince of Peace Isaiah foretold. Jesus refused to be lured into the worldly pursuit of power, even power we imagine He would have exercised judiciously. But most telling, for us, he was asked to turn a stone into bread, bread that the poor could eat and be filled by.

We see all the hungry right in our state, and starving people around the world.

Now we know that Jesus actually did raise the dead. He did feed the 5,000 with a few loaves and a bit of wine. Wasn't that like turning a stone into bread as Satan had asked. He healed the sick in droves. But Jesus did these things not for himself, for his glory, but for the glory of God. The miracles that Jesus performed were all acts of compassion and mercy, acts that are available to any human heart. God, in Christ, had to be FULLY human. The miracles of Jesus were not as some theologians would say, to show the power of God. What Satan tempted him to do was to deviated from the terrible vision of who and what he was, to be the sacrificial lamb, not a King.

When I went on my vision quest taught that you do so not just for yourself, but “so that the people might live,” the Lakota say. What vision comes to you is what God is asking you not just to do and be, but to share with your vision with the community. My answer came on my third time in the wilderness of The Black Hills, when a white horse came to me. It was a real white horse, I touched her, petted her soft nose. And I sang an a shunka wakan song, an honor song to her. Was she one of the angels God sent to watch over me? To give me my vision? In Matthew’s version of the vision quest of Jesus, we are told that the angels came and ministered unto Jesus. Angels? I believe that the white horse, yes, and all the animals and the birds are God’s creations. The trees and rocks too, if we are to take scripture seriously, they could even sing if necessary! Sentient beings all, because they were made, out of love, by our Creator.

When you complete your time in the wilderness you gather in ceremony and tell what visions were sent to you by the Creator. When I talked about the white horse, the medicine man, Elmer Running chuckled. He knew I was struggling against priesthood, and so when I asked what the white horse might have meant, he said “the spirit sends the white horse to show the wicasa wakan, the holy man, where his altar is. That was that.

When Jesus completed his vision quest, he immediately began his public ministry of servanthood. He came down from his vision quest and by his actions, showed His community, we Christians, what is required of us who are now his Body on earth. Feed the hungry. Clothe the naked. Free the captives. Declare that His vision should be lived out by those in power.

This Lent, let us be true to the vision of Jesus. This Lent, let us have the courage to enter the silence so we might hear the still small voice of God calling us to service.

This Lent, let us be true to our Anglican vision of stewardship of our Mother the Earth. And this Lent, let us be Christians who are of this beautiful place we call Minnesota.