



The First Sunday of Lent (C)
March 10, 2019
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+May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable to you, O God, our Strength and Redeemer. Amen.

“Let it snow. Let it snow. Let it snow.” Familiar words to a Christmas song that these days feel less than jolly? Some might say that this has been the “Winter of our Discontent”. So many overcast and cloudy days! So much snow and bitterly cold temperatures! The days of winter have impacted schools, businesses and yes, church.

Other parts of the country have suffered even more. After devastating fires, mudslides continue to cause serious damage in California. A report this past week indicated that twenty-one thorough bred racing horses died at one race track in California in part due to injuries because of so much mud.

A report of tornadoes this past week in Alabama killed many people in the sixty plus miles of wide-spread devastation due to 174 mile an hour winds. I sent word to Emmanuel Episcopal Church in Opelika, Alabama, offering our thoughts and prayers in the wake of much destruction.

Last week, the SpaceX unmanned space launch went off without a ‘glitch’ at the Kennedy Space Center. Last week, it was reported that North Korea has resumed its building of a missile site. Go figure!

These are the times of our lives. These are a few examples of the world in which we live, move and have our being. These are the times of our lives in which the Church calls us in to a deeper reality, a journey, a retreat, a season to make more time for prayer, for fasting and abstinence and for giving of ourselves and our financial resources for others.

The disciplines of Lent for many of us are not new. The disciplines of Lent for some of us are new. The disciplines of Lent are observances to which the Church calls us as ways of entering into a deeper relationship with God in Jesus.

Last week as I began thinking about today’s message, a question came to mind, “What would a heart-healthy Lent look and feel like?” The phrase, “heart-healthy”, is often associated with vitamins, diets and exercise. What if we observed a Lent in which all that we do and say is out of a context of being “heart-healthy”?

In today’s Gospel, Jesus is led by the Spirit of God into a wilderness. That leading is on the heels of his Baptism in the River Jordan. There, all three persons of the Trinity were made manifest: The voice of the Father, Jesus the Son and the Spirit, all present. Suddenly and presumably without warning, Jesus finds himself in a wilderness or a desert experience.

A few years ago, I had the good fortune to visit the Jordan where Jesus is said to have been baptized. The immediate area along the Jordan is lush and green. One only has to travel a short distance to find very dry and arid conditions, few trees and little vegetation. The contrast is stark. The contrast for Jesus must surely have been stark as well. The contrast between the former Season of Epiphany and that of Lent is stark.

Today's Gospel reveals that Jesus was tempted to throw away what had been revealed at his Baptism. He was tempted to embrace fame and a kind of authority and rule which could have propelled him to stardom.

Whatever that temptation looked and felt like whether from an exterior source or an interior self-struggle or both, Jesus managed to remain faithful. He remained faithful to God and to the mission which was unfolding before him. The wilderness experience revealed to Jesus that he was able to reject temptation and to embrace grace.

Turning away from temptation and embracing grace are aspects of the Lenten journey. The disciplines of Lent call us physically, emotionally and spiritually to embrace the grace of discipleship. They provide us with a framework out of which a 'heart-healthy' relationship with Jesus can be embraced, nourished and fed.

Whatever temptations and doubts Jesus faced in the wilderness, his relationship with God, the Father, remained strong. The disciplines of the wilderness enabled him to see more clearly and to follow more nearly the path to which he was called as the Beloved of God.

In the chaotic world in which we live, we are the "Beloved of God" and form the "Beloved Community of God". We are called to be people of justice, mercy and love. We are called to an examination of who we are before God and what that might mean to us in our relationship with God and with one another.

If I could take a heart-healthy pill, a multi-super-charged vitamin which would enable me to be a more thoughtful and kind person, I'd buy it in a 'heart beat'. I'd buy cases of it and start taking the pills immediately. But, it doesn't really work like that, does it?

A heart-healthy relationship with God starts with a heart-healthy relationship with one's self. What might our lives look and feel like if we were to clear away thinking, speaking and acting that get in the way of who God calls us to be as God's Beloved?

During this Season of Lent, we are called to reflect on who we are in light of who Jesus was and is and calls us to be. We are called to look deep within our hearts to see more clearly if we are living lives of love or not. We are called to be honest, to be truthful and to realize that what comes *from* us is deeply rooted within our hearts. How important it is to have a healthy and happy heart!

I pray that each of us will experience Lent as a season of prayer, reflection and forgiveness. Through prayer and reflection, we can learn to forgive ourselves and others. We can experience the joy of forgiveness for those things we have done and those things we have left undone.

Lent calls us to a heart that is healthy and one that beats in sync with the heart of Jesus. Let us do all we can to make that a reality for our sake and those around us. Blessings for a 'heart-healthy' Lent! Amen.