

Wonders in the Wilderness

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Gates Presbyterian Church

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(Service included commissioning of Jamaica Mission Team.)

Matthew 4:1-11

In the middle of the sixth century an Italian Monk named Benedict wrote a small book, the “Rule of St. Benedict” about monasticism, but it is useful for anyone seeking guidance as to how to have a closer relationship with Christ. Not surprisingly, there is a chapter in Benedict’s book on how to observe Lent that includes the suggestion that people undertake *extra* acts of self-denial. Notice the assumption that self-denial be a part of every day of the Christian year!

For all too many, Lent is only about self-denial, about giving up something as a test of the spirit, as an important part of ones journey of faith. However, if that is the sum of the definition, what one surrenders, then it should not be a surprise that some people see Lent as something to endure, to get past, to overcome.

When I have to do or undertake something onerous, I am prone to count the hours or count the miles – and calculate percentages. It is exactly sixty-seven miles from our home in Spencerport to both the airbase in Niagara Falls or our other home in Arcade. Although trips to the lake are often with Sally and when I am alone I am liable to listen to classical music, there are times when the journey seems a chore, a bore, or worse, something I *have* to do. To that end, I can point out the markers along the way, the 6.7 mile marks that represents 10% of the trip, 13.4 for 20%, the pinkish house on the curve on route 31 that represents 1/3 of the trip to the airbase. The way I figure it, if I must endure these trips, I might as well make it fun, and counting things is something I find fun. When I traveled to Orlando for a conference three weeks ago (I still think that is where I got so ill), I knew I would be away from home for 85 hours. Every 8.5 hours represented 10% of my absence. Going someplace warm in the winter is *not* my idea of fun; counting the hours helped me endure my *fate*.”

So, to those who find Lent tedious or something over which they want to overcome, I announce that of the 960 hours of these forty days, 10% or 96 of the hours are already past!

Back to Mr. Benedict. When they read this sixth century monk’s rules for Lent, some people are surprised to discover that on two occasions, Benedict stress that Lent is to be a time of *joy*. He contends that Lent is to be a time to embrace the wonders of God’s creation, its own holy, special time of discovery, of contemplation, of seeking reconciliation with God, others – and with self. Lent is a time to let go of some of the encumbrances of life in order to embrace the simple joys that are ours as sisters and brothers of faith and members of God’s family in Christ. By simple, I don’t mean simplistic – but perhaps in letting go of some the distractions of modern, so called civilized, life we might better enter into a relationship of holiness with our God.

I have confessed before how the Gospel of Mark is my favorite of the four. In part, that is the case because Mark is the “impatient” Gospel, gets to the point, has little fluff, tells the story

directly without the references back to the Old Testament found in Matthew, without additional stories as with Luke and without the deep and sometimes wordy theological reflections characteristic of John. Don't get me wrong! All four Gospels have incredible contributions to make to the whole, that is the Good News of Jesus Christ. It is just that my "default" Gospel, the one to which I turn most frequently and comfortably is Mark. For a down to earth, let's-get-to-work, direct kind of person, the Gospel of Mark is perfect. I remind you that while the first chapters of Matthew, Luke and John tell stories of Jesus conception, birth – or in the case of John, a complete rewrite of the first verse of Genesis, the first chapter of Mark quotes Isaiah, tells us of Jesus baptism by His cousin John, tells us of the temptation, the beginning of Jesus' Galilean Ministry, the call of the first disciples, the first three miracles, and the start of Jesus' preaching. Compare that to the first chapter of Luke that includes 80 verses at the end of which Jesus isn't even born yet!

That said, I find the passage in Mark about Jesus' wilderness experience a bit wanting:

And the Spirit immediately drove Him into the wilderness. He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and He was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on Him.
(Mark 1:12-13)

That's it! Fortunately, passages like the one from Matthew fill in some of the gaps whereby we get a fuller story of Jesus struggling with some of the timeless issues of discovering what is *really* important in life – lessons to which we would hearken today:

- that we live by every word that comes from the mouth of God,
- that we not put God to the test with our often petty requests,
- and that God be the ultimate object of our worship – not power, or wealth, or prestige, or anything by which humans so often define success (and failure).

The Gospels of Luke and Matthew, in telling us more of Jesus' forty days in the wilderness, give credence to the supposition that these forty days of Lent be more than something to simply endure, that Lent be about far more than just whether we fast, surrender something, give something up because that invites us to count down those 960 hours in anticipation of once again embracing our foibles as soon as Lent is over!

Instead, we are invited to experience times of Lent – be it here, in Jamaica or elsewhere and look as the wonders that are ours as gifts of God –

Lent is a time to embrace again the wonders of our God and to learn again how to love the one Who Creates, Redeems and Empowers us!

Lent is a time to learn again what it means to love God, love each other, love self and embrace the ways of mercy, humility, generosity and courage!

Lent is a time to reflect, to let go of our sense of time – forget that it is 960 hours long – and instead embrace the timelessness of a God Who invites us into a wilderness that blossoms with the lessons and gifts of God – Who invites us to embrace the wonders of faith and the wonders of life.

Amen.