

February 22, 2015
Falcon Heights Church UCC
Falcon Heights MN
The Rev. Anne Swallow Gillis

First Sunday in Lent
Mark 1:9-15

WHAT IS MOST TEMPTING?

Before I attended seminary in my early twenties, I had little idea of what Lent was really about, or why I, as a Protestant, should care one way or the other. At that point in my life, Lent was a strange, gloomy season before Easter celebrated by Catholics. I would remember childhood friends unexpectedly showing up at school with ashy smudges on their foreheads. They would speak in hushed tones about going to confession and what they were “giving up” for Lent. Over at my house of low-church Congregationalists, all eyes were happily on Easter! My sister and I eagerly anticipated new spring dresses, savoring chocolate rabbits and hunting for cheery, colored eggs. Lent, those five weeks before Easter, retained a dour and funeral-like atmosphere to me that was best avoided.

But in seminary, I happened to fall into a crowd of brainy and irreverent Lutherans. They, along with some equally outspoken and bourbon-drinking southern Episcopal students, provided me with my first introduction to the rich cycle of the Christian church’s liturgical seasons. From their leadership in student chapel services and in our late-night theological debates, I learned about the reflective and penitential “purple times” of Advent and Lent. Of the value of a time set apart, of the power of silence and contemplative prayer, and of my own need for self-reflection. I even began to sort through this idea of repentance. In Lenten practices of receiving ashes, self-examination, confession, reflective scripture study, I began to recognize my deeper hunger *to experience God*. It was no longer enough for me to just *think* about God in theology classes. This somber season of Lent appeared to be a way *into* a deeper perception of God and God’s actions around me, if I gave it my time, my attention and willing intent.

Earlier this month, our Worship Ministry Team and I talked together about possibilities for worship and reflection during Lent this year. We recognized that our recent History Sunday of sharing specific memories about this church’s past had stirred up a mix of both grateful *and* painful feelings among those who participated. Now what? How will this congregation not stay stuck in the negative memories and painful feelings? We don’t forget the past. But what would it be like if each person in this church system faced his or her role, whether it was through words or silence, actions or inaction...and truly repented?

Our rational, linear-thinking brains may not perceive this to be a good or safe idea. It seldom seems like a good idea to acknowledge one’s own mistakes, weaknesses or sins. It occurred to the Worship Team and me that we may need

to explore a different perspective on what we perceive we have experienced around here. That different perception comes not from the brain, but from what the ancients called “the primary organ of spiritual perception,” or the heart. Around the world, and across religious traditions, the heart was understood to possess a different way of perceiving. This manner of perceiving is accessed almost sideways, intuitively, through symbols, metaphors, music, silence, visual art, time in nature. “May the eyes of your heart be opened,” wrote St. Paul. Somehow the heart, if we can access its depths, organizes the information field of life differently; it doesn’t divide life only into good/bad, right/wrong. The Worship Team and I sighed as we considered the way forward for this congregation: perhaps this Lent can be a journey deeper into our hearts, and the heart of God’s mercy and love.

The season of Lent always begins with a description of Jesus’ temptations in the wilderness immediately following his baptism in the Jordan River by John the Baptist. This story about Jesus shows up in three of the four Gospel accounts of Jesus’ life in the New Testament, but Mark’s (what we just heard) is the shortest. Almost frustratingly so, if you have read the accounts found in Luke and Matthew. Mark’s Gospel condensed and to the point...to the point of not telling us in what ways Jesus is tempted! Matthew and Luke go into considerable detail about “the evil one” slyly inviting Jesus to feed the masses and himself by turning rocks into bread. And he then challenges Jesus with, “If you really are the Son of God, go ahead and throw yourself off this temple spire, so God’s saving power can be revealed!” Then a final dig, “So, I hear you are proclaiming God’s reign on earth...here, let me make it easier for you...here’s all the kingdoms to come...take on some impressive powers; you and I can rule together and get this God’s reign stuff started!” Each temptation has a bit of good in it: the chance to feed hungry people, a way to show God’s power, the possibility ushering in God’s reign. In Matthew and Luke’s accounts of this story, Jesus is kept busy and we get it. Temptation is tough because it always has a bit of truth in it. But they are partial truths and not enough to make them right.

But Mark? Mark mentions none of these specific temptations. Mark’s account is briefly introduced by these tender words by God at Jesus’ baptism: “You are my Son, the Beloved.” Beloved; God is well pleased. These are words of the heart, echoing a deep theme in scripture that God, Godself, somehow has a “heart.” But Mark doesn’t linger at the river scene. “Immediately,” the Spirit drives Jesus into the wilderness....he’s there 40 days....Satan (whoever that is supposed to be) tempts him....he is hanging out with wild animals and angels. Period. No mention of the three specific ways Jesus is tempted.

What do we have here? Jesus is led by the Spirit into a barren wilderness, the historical place of Hebrew encounters with God. Centuries earlier, the Jewish people escaped from slavery in Egypt and wandered for forty years in the wilderness, learning what it means to live in covenant with God. I sometimes think that interim times between pastors are wilderness times for a congregation,

where life is unpredictable and uncertain. We are wandering around trying to discover what it means to be in covenant with God in this time and place. Jesus is alone in the wilderness, presumably fasting and praying, most likely trying to figure out what his own covenant with God is about. What does this identity of Sonship mean for him? What is God calling him to do next?

The one called “Satan” or “the tempter” or the “evil one” appears. Was it a struggle in Jesus’ head or was he actually approached by a visible, talking figure? Mark only says he was “tempted by” this manifestation of evil. But in what way? Mark tells us that the Spirit has descended like a dove not just on Jesus, but *into* him. And this same Spirit “drives” him into the wilderness. The word actually means “expels, thrusts” him into the wilderness, with the same Spirit still within him. But why no temptations listed? Karoline Lewis, a preaching professor over at our local Luther Seminary, writes that Jesus enters the wilderness “with no strategies, no fighting skills.” Jesus has only this: God is present in him. And maybe, Lewis suggests, Mark wants us to know that Jesus’ greatest temptation is “to think that God is not present...to believe that God has given up on him or withdrawn from him.” (<http://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=3537>)

I can relate to this temptation. It is very natural, and tempting because it is so easy to assume I run my life under my own power. And this may be a temptation for congregations, oddly enough. We focus more on the human institution of church, than we do on the movement of God among us. The humans here, and the church building, are all so much more visible and concrete. And it can get unpredictable and a little weird if people start talking too much about the Spirit doing this and that in their lives! And if things go wrong with an institution, we want to figure out which humans did something wrong, we want to blame and we want to fix it, now! We get caught up in wrong and right, who did what when, rehashing, if-only, on and on. It is very tempting to assume God doesn’t have much to do with all this. Why? *Because God is going to ask us each to take a good hard look at our own part.* God is going to challenge us to perceive things in a different way; to engage each other at a heart, not just a head, level. “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news,” said Jesus.

Lent is meant to be a disquieting time, unpredictable, mysterious. It’s like a wilderness time, with uncharted maze-like paths and tests and temptations. If we let it have its way with us, Lent can lead us into deeper ways of perceiving reality and responding to God’s presence. It can lead us to better understanding our own part in the wider system of a congregation. And so we journey together, deeper into our own hearts and the heart of God. Amen.