

Institutional Practice of Religion: Wounded but NOT Dead!

*Sermon preached by the Rev. F. M. "Buddy" Stallings, Priest-in-Charge,
at the eleven o'clock service, February 26, 2012.
The First Sunday in Lent.
Based on Mark 1:9-15.*

Truth be told, I go back and forth on Lent. Some years it fairly seriously gets on my nerves and seems to involve contrived opportunities for earnest spiritual work, often imagined at the hand of a celestial but stern schoolteacher who wants me to write on the bulletin board 1000 times: "I will be better." Other years I experience it as an intimate invitation to come home—to come home by way of a deep journey, which for sure is not without its own kind of fearfulness. But in this version of Lent I know that I am accompanied every step of the way by the spirit of God, a spirit that is far from a pushover—in fact one that demands intense honesty about my life, but also never leaves me alone.

Happily this year, my experience of Lent so far falls in the latter category. Ash Wednesday was a moving day, with thousands of people coming down this long center aisle clad in high heels and hard hats, some carrying every single item they own in this world, others swathed in just the Prada of the day, some almost jaunty, others showing the wear of the world on their shoulders—and all in search of something deeper than themselves.

The institutional practice of religion may be screwed up, but it isn't dead. I am more than a little happy about that for a variety of reasons, some really personal and fairly selfish ones, but mostly because it verifies what my soul tells me already: the search for God is serious and widespread; and no matter how badly or ineffectively we often engage the search, or how often the church has or will let us down, the desire to find God is almost as good as finding God. Among my circles there are always discussions about why so many come for ashes and palms when so relatively few come the rest of the year. I don't know and I don't care—and I'm not being flip. People come when they need to come, and if part of our job as the more regular Christians is to always be sure that we are here for them, then all the better.

Because the gospel of Mark is the twitter version of the gospels, a great deal happens in a few words. These seven cryptic verses cover the baptism of Jesus, his temptation in the wilderness, and John the Baptist's incarceration. The writer of John would hardly be warmed up by now. My theory about Mark is not that he knew less than Matthew, Luke or John but that he refused to fluff it up much. Despite a deep love for words, I am immensely drawn to his lack of them. The paucity of this narrative makes it all the more precious and somehow more authoritative for me. In passing, it is interesting if not surprising to note that the gospel of John with its highly exalted Christology, its claim of Jesus' coexistence with God, gives no mention of Jesus ever being tempted. Apparently by the time of John's writing, there was no place for Jesus to show such humanness. In the case of Mark, as the earliest written, the one closest by a decade to the time of Jesus, the narrative could be less driven by agenda.

It is the temptation of Jesus that concerns me most this morning; it is Lent after all. We are all about sin and what we are and are not tempted to do this time of year. Mark merely mentions that Jesus was tempted, feeling no need to lay out what the particular temptations were. One of our lingering claims, both extraordinary and contradictory, is that Jesus was tempted as we are but never sinned. Like so many of the positions we take about Jesus, his living without the commission of sin stretches

our equally urgent insistence that he was fully human. We do not know humanness without sin. Let's be honest: it is complicated for us to know in fact what was truest about him, indeed to know precisely who he was—complications that argue strongly that what we *believe* about him is much less important than what we *know* of him in our hearts and our love for one another.

Upon further reflection, I am actually quite glad Mark neither reported nor created the particular temptations faced by Jesus. It is rare for us in the practice of religion not to do so—not to name and judge the sins. We actually love it when we can with great clarity and precision say, “This is what is wrong,” “This is where the devil got us or almost got us,” “Yes, I did this, but thank God, I didn't do that like so and so did.” You can almost hear the birth sounds of religion in such pondering, the grinding and grating of a new hierarchy of sin. We like that because as long as we can find anyone (and we almost always can) who is a more notorious sinner than we are, then we are instantly relieved.

Mark said, “Jesus was in the wilderness for forty days, tempted by Satan.” Not a single sensational detail was mentioned because what mattered for Jesus is what matters for us: when faced with life—in the wilderness or on Park Avenue, which are often quite similar—we encounter only one dilemma: will we choose God or will we choose something else? Will we choose to live lives of openness and generosity? Or will we choose to get and consume every grain that we can possibly accumulate—not as one who drinks deeply of life but as one whose satiation is beyond being sated? Will we arrogantly win at all costs, win every little argument, not just the big ones, finding being right and smart the only place we can bear being?

In this remarkably brief piece, Jesus bounds back from the wilderness, seemingly unhindered by 40 days with beasts, eager to get on with bringing the Good News of God. And what was this good news: “God has come near and wants our lives to be different,” Jesus tells us. “Change from the things that keep you from God; and believe again in the good news!” If our annual observance of Lent, artificial as it is or can be, focuses our attention on the direct connection between our actions and our experience of God, then it is worth at least 40 days a year and, in fact, much more than that.

In the end, our attempts to live as people who know God are not nearly as complicated or as flashy as we often imagine them to be. Lent reminds us that it is time to return to the basics, which is not the same as becoming more religious. Remember that religion is our creation; the world is God's creation. Lent reminds us that we are being formed by a God who holds us in astounding regard, regard so absolute that God desires to be in relationship with us, not measured by the extent of our piety but by how lovingly, generously and joyously we embrace the world around us. The only thing that is solemn about Lent is the intensity of the imperative to live filled to the brim of life with love.

Any practice or deprivation we employ to observe Lent that takes life from us rather than giving it to us and to those around us is our creation, not God's. Lent can make us mindful, conscious, alert—conditions that can leave us breathless and can indeed call us up quite short for how unaware we often are; but it is never about being dour or wracked with needless and self-serving guilt.

God is alive and lives and thrives on acts of love. Temptations come and go; sometimes we succumb, sometimes we don't. But through it all in Lent and throughout the year, God calls us to live and thrive on acts of love.

In the name of God: *Amen*.

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325 Park Avenue at 51st Street, New York, New York 10022.