

The Rev. Erin Hensley
1 Peter 3:21; Mark 1: 11-13
Lent 1B; February 26, 2012

Risky Business and Divine Opportunity

In her book *Teaching a Stone to Talk* Annie Dillard points out the power in worship. She writes:

On the whole, I do not find Christians, outside of the catacombs, sufficiently sensible of conditions. Does anyone have the foggiest idea what sort of power we so blithely invoke? Or, as I suspect, does no one believe a word of it? The churches are children playing on the floor with their chemistry sets, mixing up a batch of TNT to kill a Sunday morning. It is madness to wear ladies' straw hats and velvet hats to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews.¹

Annie Dillard has it right; when we gather for worship, we encounter the most powerful force there is—that of the living God. We think we are just saying words, kneeling and standing or what some call doing church aerobics. But there are no mere words, no mere gestures here. All of what we say and do in worship reconnects us to the one, holy and undivided Trinity. The words and actions acknowledge that we are not our own, but God's; that this world is not ours, but God's world. Christ draws all the world to himself and what we say and do in worship intertwines our very being with the force in which live and move and have our being.

The sacrament of Baptism is especially risky business. Yes, in baptism we receive an indelible kiss from God. In baptism both God and Church, the Body of Christ, claims us as family. In baptism, we are blessed. And that blessing is not the end of our story. That blessing is no physical protection from harm, no guarantee of ease and comfort. That blessing is the beginning of following Christ in this very, broken world. Listen carefully to the prayer of thanksgiving over the water:

We thank you, Almighty God, for the gift of water. Over it the Holy Spirit moved in the beginning of creation. Through it you led the children of Israel out of their bondage in Egypt into the land of promise. In it your Son Jesus received the baptism of John and was anointed by the Holy Spirit as the Messiah, the Christ, to lead us, through his death and resurrection, from the bondage of sin into everlasting life. We thank you, Father, for the water of Baptism. In it we are buried with Christ in his death. By it we share in his resurrection. Through it we are reborn by the Holy Spirit.²

¹ *Teaching a Stone to Talk* p. 40

² *The Book of Common Prayer* p. 306

I must confess to you that there is a part of this prayer I try to forget: “We are buried with Christ.” I want to rise with Christ; I hope for resurrection, but I’m not sure about the business of dying literally or metaphorically speaking.

In the world, when someone is well pleased with you, comfort versus challenge usually follows. First comes the acknowledgment of a job well done and then comes the bigger accounts, the bigger office, the bigger bonus. But not so in the church family. The blessing in baptism does not follow this worldly pattern. From the same God who claims us as sons and daughters drives us into the broken world to follow Jesus in our daily life and work. The blessing in baptism is no ending but the beginning of a journey that will involve facing temptation and trials.

God loved the Israelites and he parted the waters of the Red Sea so they could move from bondage to freedom. But the water was just the beginning. They lived in the wilderness, mumbled and grumbled, and loved and lost for forty years before they entered the Promised Land. This is the same for Jesus’ baptism. “And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.” And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan” (Mark 1:10-13a). Jesus has no time for a casual luncheon, a family photo, or even a celebratory walk down the road.

When bad things happen to good people, when we face continual loss and disappointment, we tell ourselves that we must have done something wrong. Why else would this diagnosis be? Why else would I not be able to find the right job or even employment altogether? Why else would the days seem so futile? We must have done something to deserve this. Sometimes our troubles are consequences of choices we make. More often than not, however, the pain is an outgrowth of really living-taking our choices more seriously and loving others more authentically. If Jesus has to face temptation after his baptism, certainly we can expect such encounters as Christians. We can expect some wilderness, not because we’re out of favor with God, but because we’re humans trying to do what Jesus would have us do.

The movement from baptism to wilderness, from blessing to challenge is no earthly punishment but a divine opportunity. In the wilderness we see more clearly who we are, who we are not, and who we want to be. In the wilderness we meet wild beasts. The temptation to do the right thing for the wrong reason. The temptation to act as if we are God. We face the shadow side of ourselves and the shadow side of life. And those struggles form who we are, they change our minds, they change our hearts. They teach us how to trust in the Lord. And thanks to be God, the wild beasts aren’t the only things in the wilderness. For the Israelites, God provided Moses for direction, manna for food, and a pillar of cloud for shade during the day, and light by night for their journey. For Jesus, God provided angels. You see, the wilderness is not only a place of opportunity but also a place of companionship.

Prayer and worship is the center of our life as the Church, the Body of Christ in the world. In Holy Eucharist, we'll receive the forgiveness of sins, the strengthening of our union with Christ and one another, and the foretaste of the heavenly banquet. And this grace, this blessing, is not an end but a beginning. So get your crash helmet, life preservers, and signal flares. Lent is the time for wilderness adventures; let's go, and let's go with God's help. *Amen.*