

St. Paul's Church, Healdsburg  
The Reverend Sally Hanes Hubbell  
February 22, 2015

First Sunday in Lent, Year B

Texts: Genesis 9:8-17; Psalm 25:1-9; 1 Peter 3:18-22; Mark 1:9-15

Ahh – Lent. Here we are. I'm resigned to it this year. It's not my favorite season of the church – far from it. Normally I enter Lent kicking and screaming, resisting the contemplation and subdued mood that Lent calls us to.

As always, the Season of Lent begins with the story of Jesus entering the desert for 40 days before beginning the hard work of his professional life in ministry. His time in the wilderness is hardly a vacation – he's fasting and being tormented, tempted by the devil. But for Christians, over the centuries Lent has become a time for us to refuel spiritually, a time to reorient ourselves to paying spiritual attention to our lives. We repeat this "season" not so much as a time of punishment for our inherently sinful ways, but rather to set some time apart from our regular routines for the purpose of going deeper -- deeper into our faith, deeper into our calling as Christians, and deeper into ourselves.

Usually I'd much rather be going about my regular business, out in the world accomplishing things, making connections with people I need to talk to, taking care of business and getting things done. That's the place we should all be, right, at least all of us "working professions" whose goal it is to be productive, contributing members of society? The land of productivity certainly feels like a more comfortable and rewarding domain – ironically a more natural place to be -- than a wilderness devoid of the usual routine of work and productivity. I suspect this is true for all of us whose lives have become molded around the simultaneous security and tyranny of the smart phone, by which we are ever "reachable" and always able to communicate for the purposes of our jobs.

This year, for some reason I feel more receptive to what a well-lived Lenten season might have to teach me. I'm actually glad it's Lent. Maybe I'm maturing, growing wiser, becoming a more seasoned priest and more insightful Christian. Maybe I've just been humbled into realizing that simply plowing ahead at a frenetic pace of busyness can be as much a hiding place as an accomplishment.

Maybe I'm just feeling like it's time for the kind of "break" that a stint in the wilderness requires us to take.

This past week, I got to take an actual break in the wilderness. I went on a field trip with my son Max's 4<sup>th</sup> grade class to Fort Ross, just south of Fort Bragg, where we lived for about 30 hours as 19<sup>th</sup> century officers and employees of the Russian-American Trading Company. We were living in the fort, but it felt like a wilderness – we were in awkward costumes, cooking on an open fire and eating our meals outside, no electricity, no modern technology. I had to turn off my cell phone and leave it in the car, and hike down to the fort from the parking lot with the other parents. I was very grateful for my modern down sleeping bag and the hand warmers that kept me toasty through the night, but boy, could I have done with something softer than a hard wooden floor to sleep on! Still, we had a wonderful time – it was a great trip.

In his genius, Max had signed us up for the “Hunter” group consisting of 5 kids and 3 adults. Once we got ourselves set up at the fort we hiked down to the shore where we fished and gathered mussels for supper. We basically got to play all afternoon.

If I had been signing up for jobs, I would have signed up to be a cook, because that’s pretty much the only 19<sup>th</sup> century skill I possess. I know how to cook over an open fire, and I’m usually the meal planning person on group trips. That’s my skill set and my comfort zone. The cooks on this trip had to do really hard work the whole time – they churned fresh butter from cream and planned surprisingly complicated meals to feed the 30 some people in our group. Everyone who was participating in this field trip had to go to the School every Thursday afternoon for the past month or so to get ready for our roles, and it was abundantly clear from the beginning that the cooks had the most responsibility. They were crucial to everyone on the trip eating, whereas no one was actually counting on us hunters to hunt! Which was a good thing, because the crab traps we’d spent all of our preparation time making didn’t catch a single crab!

I was so grateful that Max got to make the call of what our job would be, because had it been up to me I would have felt obliged to sign up for what I would be most productive at doing. I would have chosen to go with what I’m good at as opposed to what I know nothing about but might enjoy anyway, and I know I would have walked away with less because of it. This trip wouldn’t have been the sojourn in the wilderness that it was for me had I signed up for what I knew how to do.

This was yet another example of my children (Max in particular) coaxing me out of my comfort zone – doing something that I would never do by my own idea and without their prompting – and end up feeling richer for the experience. That’s one of the important things that being in a family is all about – we do things for each other that we wouldn’t otherwise do, and somehow we end up being the beneficiaries of our altruism.

Lent is supposed to be like that well. The disciplines of Lent are meant to be sacrifices that call us out of ourselves, out of the selfish interests that often shape our daily routines, and we end up benefiting from them. We end up leading richer and more meaningful lives because of the sacrifices we make.

I want to leave you with some insights of two contemporary Christian thinkers, Ronald Rolhesier and Christine Paintner, into the meaning and purpose of Lent.

Ronald Rolhesier points out that in our Gospel story for today in which Jesus begins his 40 days in the wilderness, the central theme of the story is Jesus going without food and being tested by demons while angels minister to him. He suggests that the demons that test us are the fears which on most days we’ll do anything to avoid facing. The demons are the ever-present potential that the order and control of our lives will slip into chaos. The central question Lent asks us, is will we let ourselves enter into the wildness of chaos and let the angles minister to us? Will we let go the death grip we keep on control and let ourselves walk into the wilderness, into the unknown, and face what frightens us most.

The “food” that we are called to give up in our Lenten fast are our favorite distractions: the busyness, entertainment, and the drive to be productive at all times. All of these things work “to shield us from the deeper chaos that lurks beneath the

surface of our lives. Lent invites us to stop eating, so to speak, stop consuming whatever it is that protects us from having to face the desert that is inside of us. It invites us to feel our smallness, to feel our vulnerability, to feel our fears, and to open ourselves to the chaos of the desert so that we can finally give the angels a chance to minister to us.

The second insight from Christine Paintner is about what we're meant to abstain from in a good Lenten fast.

"Paintner says the kind of fast drawing her this year isn't the leaving behind of treats like chocolate or other pleasures. Rather, this season she feels she is being invited to fast from things like "ego-grasping" and noticing when she wants to be in control. She also feels she is being called to fast from being strong and always trying to hold it all together, and instead to embrace the profound grace that comes through her vulnerability and tenderness....

"Paintner claims she is called to fast from anxiety and the endless torrent of thoughts which rise up in her mind to paralyze her with fear of the future, and instead enter into the radical trust in the abundance at the heart of things. She is fasting from the fear of scarcity, including the scarcity of her own time to get done whatever it is on her "to do" list. She's fasting from the fear that there isn't enough of her to go around and therefore from the compulsion to multitask. She would like her practice to become a beholding of each thing, each person, each moment.

"....Paintner feels called to fast from certainty, and to trust in the great mystery of things. Perhaps then she will arrive at Easter and realize those things from which she has fasted, she no longer needs to take back on again. In doing this, Paintner says she will experience a different kind of rising."

My prayer for us at St. Paul's is that we will use this time to walk boldly into the wilderness with Jesus. Take courage this Lent. Let yourself enter the dessert of your own fears, and of your own limitations. Let yourself enter the wilderness of your own uncertainty, because it's there that the angels will minister to you to, just as they ministered to Jesus.

Suzanne Kurtz: Lent: How Do We Understand Lent?  
Some Thoughts By Ronald Rolhesier, Other Thoughts by Christine Paintner

In my office, I have a thick square cross that was made by an artist in COS, around the time I was being ordained. I believe I initially bought it as a gift for David, but knew it was really for me – it's been in my office at both churches I've worked for.

In the center of the cross is a painting of a man in a business suit carrying a brief case, pictured from behind, as he's walking into the center of the cross. Above the man's head, it says, "Long Walk." I love this piece of Christian art because it tells the truth -- Being a Christian is a long walk, and I'm not sure what arriving even looks like, entirely.

Look at his comment – Detroit as city of Angles. Walking the hard life of day to day salvation.

### **Heart and sole: Detroiters walks 21 miles in work commute**

James Robertson, 56, of Detroit, walks about 21 miles in round trips to his job in a factory. The sheer time and effort of [getting to work has ruled Robertson's life](#) for more than a decade, ever since his car broke down. He didn't replace it because, he says, "I haven't had a chance to save for it."

When I think, if God truly has created us for a purpose, which I believe he has, that purpose must be for us to learn to live together. And look at us – look at the world! It's growing more and more populated and from our perspective it also seems more and more complicated. That means that "learning to live together" is a more complicated task than it was 200 years ago, a time that when the going got tough, the tough could get up and move to a sparsely populated continent with easily outmatched defenses.

Now in a moment in history when it is quite literally within the power of some human beings to eradicate most illness, poverty, and so many other fundamental human ills. And, when the perspectives of history and sociology have enabled us to see any argument for military conflict as the sham that it is – how will we all live together, with a growing population on a shrinking planet, with scarcer resources, and?

Of course I don't expect any of us to answer this question over the next 7 weeks of Lent. But I do think it's certainly worth praying over. I do believe that on a fundamental level, this is the wilderness which God is calling us to enter at this moment in Christendom.