

**Sermon Preached by Ms. Deanna Briody, McNulty Intern
at Calvary Episcopal Church, Pittsburgh, PA
on the First Sunday in Lent, Year B
February 18, 2024**

In the name of God, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen. Remember you are dust, and to dust you shall return. Earlier this week, the Church observed a strange tradition. We received a mark of ashes on our foreheads, and with it heard the haunting exhortation to remember our own mortality. Every one of us, old and young alike, you are dust. You are dust. You are dust. Ash Wednesday marks the beginning of Lent, that long penitential season of fasting that leads us to the greatest feast day in the Church year. Forty days, excluding Sundays, stretch between Ash Wednesday and Easter.

What are these forty days all about? Jesus came from Nazareth and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And immediately after this, the Spirit drove him into the wilderness. And he was in the wilderness forty days, being tempted by Satan. Today on this first Sunday of Lent, we receive no further instructions about fasting. We hear no mention of dust. We see no trace of ashes. No, today on the first Sunday of Lent, we are introduced to a conflict. We meet an enemy. We are ushered into the wilderness. In a few short sentences of scripture, we are given the scenery, the plot, and the players of Lent.

This 40-day journey, which we pray, will take us deeper into our own lives by taking us deeper into life with God. The scenery is a wilderness. The plot is a conflict. The players are the Lord Jesus and an adversary called Satan. Now, Satan is a mysterious figure in the scriptures. It's very early in the story of creation that we are introduced to Satan, or at least something like him. An elusive snake-like character who stands readily opposed to God and all God's beloved creatures, seeking their ruin. The presence of this adversary isn't constant through the scriptures, but he turns up here and there under different guises. The father of lies, the evil one, Lucifer, the devil, the ruler of this age, the prince of darkness.

The Church throughout the ages has taken these various mentions to refer to a single character, if you will. A great personal evil which seeks the devastation of all God's creation with active and terrible zeal. Don't think of horns and a tail. Think of the vice-like depression and anxiety that is paralyzing whole generations. Think of the wars that rage, even now, across lands and nations, across communities and families. Think of the entire ecosystems that are going up in flames of our own creating. Think in short of the million insidious ways that the human race is seeking its own destruction. If we are to believe the scriptures, this is the work of our enemy.

And this is the conflict to which we are introduced in our passage today. It's an ancient conflict, nearly as old as time itself. God and Satan face each other in opposition. And yet there's something different about this meeting, this encounter between God and Satan. Up until this point in salvation history, God had engaged the evil one as God. Omnipotent, unable to be moved, incapable of being wounded.

But something's different here. It's important to notice that our reading today begins with Christ's baptism. Baptism, which as the text says just a few lines before, is an act of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. Wait a second. God is baptized? God is submerged in the waters of repentance for the forgiveness of sins he never had committed nor ever would commit? That's right. God in Christ Jesus is baptized. Baptized like any ordinary sinner. When Christ Jesus is driven into the wilderness to face our awful enemy, he does not cease to be God. And yet, he goes as one who has taken on flesh and blood and mortality. One who has become a creature of dust, bound as we are

to return to the dust. He goes into the wilderness as one who has been baptized. One who has assumed our plight, who has identified with sinners.

In short, Christ Jesus goes into the wilderness as one who is like us. Facing what we face. Fighting our fight. When we consider the meaning of Lent, we must start with this Jesus. This Jesus who chooses to keep company with us. This Jesus who goes where we go. In Lent we encounter the God who hungers and thirsts. Who struggles against temptation. Who battles the devil not on any grand stage, but in the wilderness of ordinary life. And not just once, but over and over again. Day in and day out. We encounter the Jesus who stands not over us, and certainly not against us, but beside us. Facing what we face. Fighting our fight. The fight that Jesus starts here, the human fight that he takes up against Satan in the wilderness, is the fight that continues throughout his whole earthly ministry.

As he goes about restoring the fallen, and healing the sick, and casting out demons. It's the fight that stretches on as he makes his triumphal entry into Jerusalem. It's the fight that climaxes with his passion and crucifixion. As he bears upon himself the full weight of human brokenness and sin, the totalizing power of our enemy, and brings it down with him to death. Lent, sisters and brothers, is the invitation to keep company with Jesus, as Jesus keeps company with us. It is the call to go where he goes. It is, to put it another way, an invitation into reality, a call to recognize that there is a conflict, and that we are in it, whether or not we acknowledge it, whether or not we want to be. And this conflict is not with flesh and blood, not with other human beings, as St. Paul reminds us, but with the cosmic powers over this present darkness. The spiritual forces of evil which seek to reign in us and around us, in our lives and in our world.

So what are we to do in the face of this reality? How are we to enter it? How are we to accept this grand story as our story, as we live out the obedience of faith? Well, the Church offers us a two-part instruction, fast and practice repentance. Why these things? It's a good question to ask. I've come to think of fasting and repentance as two complementary ways of telling the truth, or we might say of practicing the truth. When we fast, we feel our hunger, our emptiness, our need. In reality, of course, our hunger extends beyond the need for food, for sweets, for anything we can merely touch and taste. And precisely because of that, physical hunger becomes a spiritual reminder. We remember we are not yet whole, that there is much we lack. We yearn in a new way, an embodied way, to be filled with all the fullness of God.

True fasting is not about punishing the body, which Christ Jesus took up and claimed as his own. No, true fasting is the discipline of making space, literal space, in which we can feel and remember that all is not yet well in our world. As fasting engages the body, so repentance engages the mind. When we practice repentance, we reflect on the ways we have failed, individually and corporately, in the primary call of the Christian life. To love God with our whole hearts. To love our neighbors as ourselves. We ask for mercy, for forgiveness. To be clear, repentance is not about curving inward, staring at yourself until you feel appropriately guilty. No, repentance is simply another vital way in which we tell the truth. The truth that all is not yet well. When we practice repentance, we take our place with Jesus in the wilderness. We look our enemy in the face and resist the comfort of his lies. We do the holy work of resisting evil by refusing to cover up our part in it. And that's what Lent is all about at the end of the day. It's about the conflict between good and evil that plays out in the wilderness of every day. It's about keeping company with, taking our stand beside Jesus. The creature of dust, the God who is baptized with sinners, the one who hungers with us, who fights beside us. We cannot end this conflict, this ancient war. But take heart, with us is the one who can. Amen.