First Sunday in Lent All Saints’ Church

February 22, 2015 Year B

Genesis 9:8-17 First Letter of Peter 3:18-22

Psalm 25:1-9 Mark 1:9-15

Let us pray: “Lord you have created us for yourself, and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in Thee.”

Lent is an invitation to share in a communal time of repentance- a return, a reminder to “Behold the Lamb of God who takest away the sins of the world.”

In repentance, we are not just turning away from temptation, but we are turning toward a deeper consciousness, a deeper place of knowing and committing to making an intentional break from the ego.

Our Gospel reading this morning literally throws us into this place.

After Jesus’ baptism, the Spirit drives Jesus into the wilderness, into wild desolation. The Greek “drives” is better translated as “threw him out.” Jesus is thrown into the desert. Who is doing this? Who is this Spirit, if not God? This is God’s doing.

Because our gospel writers profoundly believe in an ancient future, they believe that their present and their future can be better understood through the lens of the past.

Jesus is tested in the desert for forty days- a reminder of Israel’s test of forty years in the wilderness. A test of much suffering, and yet that suffering was transformed into the power and gift of liberation.

Jesus is tested in the desert for forty days- a comfort for Christians as Mark, our gospel writer, is writing during persecution.

Jesus is tested in the desert for forty days- and today, our first Sunday of Lent, all of Christendom is sent forth on its Lenten journey.

For forty days Jesus wrestles with beasts. He is also experiencing the flutter of angels’ wings. Jesus is suspended between heaven and hell. In our own times of desolation, we too can be suspended between heaven and hell.

Here’s our reminder (our turning): The opposite of sin is not virtue, but faith. Sin begins and fear dominates when we forget to trust in God, and surrender to God’s will. So bring everything on this Lenten journey. Don’t think small backpack. God will carry all sizes.

And so for this Lent, I have lifted up one of my fears. I have a fear of dementia, of Alzheimers. This disease strikes randomly and so why wouldn’t it strike me?

I also have been struggling this past year with a colleague, a friend, who has early onset of Alzheimer’s. She is disappearing right before my eyes. I am angry, upset, sad, afraid, and suspended more in hell than by angels ministering to me.

Simultaneously, I learned that we have a parishioner, Anne Wardwell, who has been a long time member of All Saints’ (her sister, Port Simons and husband Jim were also long time members). She pledges every year, even though she lives away, in the Kendall, in Hanover, in their memory unit.

She has Alzheimer’s. I was in Hanover for a diocesan meeting, and I knew I needed to stop in and meet her.

As I walked into her room, I introduced myself as the Rector of All Saints’ Church. She took my face between her hands and caressed my cheeks. She rubbed my arms, patted my head, and kissed my hand.

A warm welcome, indeed.

We moved to a bulletin board of pictures, but Anne wanted to show me a plastic flower in a vase.

We moved over to her bed, where there was a blanket with the nativity scene, but Anne showed me her quilt, full of stitched flowers.

We moved to her dresser bureau, where there were beautiful necklaces, but Anne showed me her silk scarf of flowers.

“Oh, I think you want me to see flowers. Maybe you were a gardener.”

The aid in the room said, “Oh, we didn’t know that about her. We do know that she is an historian and an archivist, that she is a graduate of Wellesley, that she travelled and lived in San Francisco and Havana, Cuba, and that she retired in Peterborough with her husband.”

“And,” I chimed in, “that she is a member of All Saints’ Church.”

“Oh, we didn’t know that, but it explains why she loves the harp music so much. Two times a week a harpist comes in and plays hymns. Anne loves being with her; it is very calming for her; it gives her solace.”

“I will send her pictures of All Saints’ and I am sure we have a CD with music from our choir. Maybe she would like to listen. I will send that as well.”

When I got home, I called Jean Peters to see if she had known Anne. “Oh yes. She was quiet, a “behind the scenes” person, but everyone wanted her on their committee because she got things done. She rolled up her sleeves and got right to work. And she was also a beautiful gardener.”

“Oh yes, I think I know that.”

Even in the midst of so much loss, suffering, confusion, there was a connection- through community, humility, and persistence, I felt the touch of God’s heart beating in my own. In Anne, I had seen the face of Jesus. And she, in all of her glory, helped me to not be so afraid.

Our youth this past weekend went to CityReach, a part of Ecclesia Ministry, which works with those who are unhoused in Boston. Our children met people who for the most part live on the streets, in the cold, without a home, and for a weekend, they spent time with them. They provided food, clothing, and encouragement, and they worshipped together. In those who are homeless, they saw the face of Jesus. In the plight of the homeless, they saw a call to action. In the face of suffering, they became empowered. Yes, they can do something; they can make a difference.

They have decided to fast next weekend, a 30 hour fast in honor of those who are unhoused. And to think together about what they can do, not only for those in Boston, but for those in our own Mondanock region that live unsheltered. And Saturday night, at the peak of the fast, we will meet in the crypt and break bread together and pray. They are inspired.

Autumn, would like to close with a thought and a prayer.