

**First Sunday in Lent (Lent 1A) – March 9, 2014**  
**Genesis 2:15-17; 3:1-7; Psalm 32; Romans 5:12-19; Matthew 4:1-11**  
**By The Rev. Kevin D. Bean**

After being baptized by John in the Jordan River, Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness alone where he spent forty days both struggling with the extent to which he would trust God to be God, *and* discerning what it meant to be God's Son, the Beloved One called by God, and how he would act appropriately to fulfill that call. And during Lent, we are encouraged to take the time to struggle with what it means to trust God to be God, and to realize who we are as God's beloved sons and daughters, what our call to discipleship in Christ is, and how we are to act consistent with that call. The sermon on this First Sunday in Lent is about Jesus in the wilderness becoming aware of and overcoming his temptations of distractions from his identity and call; and it is also about *our* being tempted to distraction rather than willing that God's purpose and no other be done through us. Of course, the experience of even writing this sermon included the numerous times I was distracted by all sorts of things—both external as well as internal.<sup>i</sup> That reminds me of a greeting card that a former colleague of mine had on her desk which said "Thinking of you." Yet, on the same front cover as the greeting, "Thinking of You," there was displayed a pie chart with the title, "a breakdown of my thoughts." The pie itself was broken into slices of thoughts that included, "quitting my job," and "easy ways to make millions." There was even a small sliver of thought devoted to the category, "unmentionable." And even though the card's greeting said, "Thinking of you," the segment of the pie labeled "you" was only a small sliver of the "breakdown of my thoughts." The largest section, nearly half of the pie, is taken up by the thought, "next meal."<sup>ii</sup> That pie chart rings true for me, and I'd probably add a few more slices, such as "must check my emails," and another one that also says, "must check my emails."

As a counterbalance to all our distractions, we again are offered the Lenten journey which begins in the desert and takes us towards Holy Week and Easter—a journey which has been built into the Church's observances for nearly 1800 years. Of course, Lent as a season originated directly out of the Church's experience of not only the Passion and death of Christ, but also the fact of Easter. To us today, Lent is the season that projects itself from the fact of the Risen Christ to have us ask, in light of our Risen Lord who is loose in the world, how we should live and how we can join him not only on his journey to Jerusalem long ago, but also in his ongoing mission of repairing the world. And so, we are summoned to a discernment process in the Lenten Season. Our Ash Wednesday liturgy that begins Lent states, "I invite you, therefore, in the name of the Church, to the observance of a Holy Lent, by self-examination and repentance; by prayer, fasting and self-denial, and by reading and meditating on God's holy Word."<sup>iii</sup> These traditional Lenten disciplines recommended in our Prayer Book are too often taken out of context, resulting in either a somewhat grim or artificial feel to the season, or a temptation to show off our asceticism. And, if disconnected from Christ's story, and Christ's presence, Lent itself can just feel like a distraction to half-measures, kind of like a second try at New Year's resolutions. And we know how good we are at those!<sup>iv</sup>

Lent is meant to be a season to focus on this quest of discerning our discipleship and the form that might take—of being attentive and available to the voice of Christ leading

us to new or renewed intersections of responding to deep hungers while finding our own deep gladness, to paraphrase Frederick Buechner. God wants us to be truly available to Christ and his ongoing mission. And it is only as a means to hear God's call more clearly that we find ourselves giving up this or letting go of that; and possibly fasting—fasting from some of our more self-centered pursuits, bad habits, old grudges and discontents, and some of our more trivial distractions. Apparently then, the quest to discern the path of our discipleship could benefit from some form of discipline.

Lent does remind us that discipline is the other side of discipleship. As Henri Nouwen pointed out, discipleship without discipline is like waiting to run in the marathon without ever practicing. And discipline without discipleship is like always practicing for the marathon but never participating in one.<sup>v</sup> True discipline is the creation of certain types of intentionality that keep time and space open for God's purposeful presence in our lives. Discernment of discipleship requires discipline. As does living out that discipleship; worship requires discipline; caring for others requires discipline; life-long growth and formation as Christians requires discipline. Seeing the relationship of discernment, discipleship and discipline in this way, Lent loses its grim feel and painful artificiality.

Having said all that, I have to ask myself—and you as well—what is it that gets in the way of a disciplined quest to discern the Risen Christ's call to discipleship? For one, we may have a funny feeling about employing the traditional disciplines recommended in Lent, which, ironically, can feel like a distraction from following Christ with gladness and singleness of heart. I recall the New Yorker cartoon in which a woman sitting behind a desk states, "This year, I'm giving up for Lent." Would that we could experience Lent without distraction, including the distraction of giving things up; because even then, our focus can become distracted by the very things we've given up. That led former Presiding Bishop Frank Griswold to state, "To live in today's world as a faithful person, is enough of a discipline. There is no need to take on more."<sup>vi</sup> I do have to say, however, that I am still looking to live into Christ's mission in a way that enables me to be less distracted...thinking of you!

Turning to our gospel, Matthew's account of Jesus' time in the wilderness of Judea describes briefly three temptations to distraction. First, there's the temptation to turn stones into bread, in other words, to be dazzling through a magical route or quick fix, in order both to satisfy his own hunger and to be the most immediate and relevant people pleaser. To act like this would be to be willing to be defined by others and their expectations, and to misuse his power for his own gain. Secondly, there's Jesus' temptation to be sensational by engineering a miraculous rescue for himself were he to jump off the top of the Temple. With this goes the temptation of using his power to make himself safe and secure with the expectation that God will intervene and save him. From our perspective, it would mean imagining that God will intervene and make us safe and secure *even if* we abdicate our own responsibility and do destructive or self-destructive things. In short, it is the temptation to be spectacular *and* irresponsible—to dabble with our faith, to put God to the test no matter, say, how crazy we drive, or no matter what we do to our bodies or to our environment. And thirdly, there's the temptation to wield

dominating power over all the kingdoms of the earth, to grab power without earning it.<sup>vii</sup> In short, this is the temptation to be driven by power without responsibility. These were the temptations that would supposedly fulfill Jesus' calling as God's Beloved Son. But Jesus works through these distracting temptations to be dazzling, dabbling and dominating,<sup>viii</sup> which would have disconnected him from his real calling and true identity. Jesus deflected these devilish distractions while realigning his own desires so as to be in sync with the Desire of God. And Jesus didn't just overcome these temptations *once* in the wilderness. Surely, they continued to distract and bedevil him up to the moment of his death on the cross.

A few people have to wrestle with such distracting temptations regularly, be they presidents, potentates, performers, or folk further down the pecking order. And not only those with strong egos are thus tempted. As writer and educator Parker Palmer points out<sup>ix</sup>, a more common temptation for many of us is to think of ourselves as never good or beloved enough, as more or less irrelevant, mundane and powerless. This temptation to feel only the poverty of spirit in ourselves, and to disregard the presence and power and purpose of God who calls each of us beloved, is the flip-side of the temptations felt by those in our world with stronger egos. Yet both contexts of temptation—whether from the stronger ego or the weaker ego – or even from the “egomaniac with an inferiority complex” as some folk describe themselves—all these states of mind entice us with the same illusion that we need what the devil, as it were, is peddling if we are to be affirmed by others and lead lives of any consequence or worth. And let's admit how readily we can be distracted by these temptations, these most misleading distractions to living a life<sup>x</sup> that is true to ourselves and to our quest as disciples of the Living Christ.

Later on in our gospel, Jesus would teach his disciples to pray that God not lead them into temptation.<sup>xi</sup> But, of course, that doesn't mean that God should or would spare them or us from all times of trial and testing.<sup>xii</sup> Clearly, temptation is not to be avoided at all costs<sup>xiii</sup>--although it is wise to avoid temptations you are not strong enough to resist. Temptations are inevitable for all of us, and these distracting desires to be dazzling, dabbling and dominating are not foreign to us. Whatever form temptation may take, it may be passed through with trust in God's support, and with the support of others whom we can trust. These tempting tests, these devilish distractions are real and powerful, but they are limited. Like Jesus—in fact, with Jesus—we can trust in God, and follow Him through all our times of trial and temptation.<sup>xiv</sup>

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<sup>i</sup> My mind and heart are often distracted from the sacramental nature of the present moment (and looking back on that moment when it has passed) - distracted by a work—no, workaholic—ethic, as well as by a male and North American prizing of achievement, by excessive worries, and by the stress created by so-called time-saving things such as e-mail that seem to be bringing the future crashing in on the present that much more rapidly, like the video game (that I could never win) in which the road rushes in upon the driver at ever faster and faster speeds. I'm reminded of and convicted by Thomas Merton's statement:

“...being attentive to the times of the day...the reason why we don't take time is a feeling that we have to keep moving. This is a real sickness. We live in the fullness of time. Every moment is God's own good time. The whole thing boils down to giving ourselves, in prayer, a chance to realize that we have what we seek. We don't have to rush after it. It was there all the time, and if we give it time, it will make itself known to us.”

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Writers such as Parker Palmer, Thomas Merton, Henri Nouwen, Ram Dass and Thich Nhat Hanh all point out that much of human action could be classified as distraction; and distractions more often than not cause misplaced action, hyperaction, inaction, re-enactment, or reaction. Already we are all often so occupied with jobs, family life and other pursuits; and we are often so pre-occupied with worries about future activities. Occupations fill our time and space now and pre-occupations fill our time and space long before we even get there. And in all of this we find ourselves distracted in so many ways. We are often distracted from right action by our fears of failure or success, criticism or praise, as well as fears of the unfamiliar and all that which could threaten our “comfort zone” or disturb our places of privilege

A few years ago, New York Times correspondent Thomas Friedman reported on a World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland where he heard a lot of interesting new phrases. Friedman wrote,

“My favorite was that we now live in an age of what a Microsoft researcher, Linda Stone, called ‘continuous partial attention’...It means that while you are answering your e-mail and talking to your kid, your cell phone rings and you have a conversation. You are now involved in a continuous flow of interactions in which you can only partially concentrate on each. ‘If being fulfilled is about committing yourself to someone else, or some experience, that requires a level of sustained attention,’ said Ms. Stone. And that is what we are losing the skills for, because we are constantly scanning the world for opportunities [or being scanned] and we are constantly in fear of missing something better. That has become incredible spiritually depleting.”

The Quaker educator and writer Parker Palmer adds that though we certainly need to overcome and avoid the frenzied and overworked and reactive tendencies that always lurk in our active lives, we are not necessarily called to leave the active life nor abdicate our responsibilities to find a spiritual center. Instead, we need all the more to embrace our God-given powers and gifts and to fathom the spirit and truth of our active lives and develop a path of *right* action, action that isn’t frenzied, distracted, and reactive, but calm and intentional and in touch with the presence of God. As Martha the active and Mary the contemplative were sisters, not the same as each other but nonetheless sisters; so we should not see action and contemplation as contradictory, but rather as sisters, each providing something of great value to the other - each bringing a dimension of life that honors the fullness of what it means to be alive and in right relationship with God, ourselves and others. The great danger is thus not that of leading a full and vital active life, with all the mistakes and suffering such a life brings, along with its joys. Instead the danger is to withdraw fearfully from the more active or the more contemplative place to which we are called, and to thus squander the experience of fullness and the integration of the active and the contemplative which is our birthright and our true vocation.

My growing edge is still that of becoming a contemplative activist. I’ve got the activist part down cold; but because I lack the fuller integration with the contemplative approach, my activism is often anything but *right* action. As Parker Palmer defines action as “any way that we can co-create reality with other beings and with the Spirit;” he then connects this to the heart of contemplation which he defines as “any way that we can unveil the illusions that masquerade as reality and reveal the reality behind the masks.” Two huge illusions are my self-imposed notions of indispensibility and the feeling that I’m never quite measuring up, never good enough. I’m seeking a balance whereby I can find that there’s more to my action than being the actor, and the action that is accomplished. As I learn to remain mindful behind all my action and distraction, hyper-action and reaction, I can lessen my attachment to them as I watch them come and go. Yet, rather than try to block out all that comes at me, I’ve found that if I take in most of what comes to me from external and internal sources and let it come and go, rise and pass away, that that is a better way to handle this than if I were to try to suppress or block out these things. I recall a wonderful poem called the “Guest House” by the 13th century mystic Rumi:

“This being human is a guest house. Every morning a new arrival.

A joy, a depression, a meanness, some momentary awareness comes as an unexpected visitor.

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Welcome and attend them all! Even if they're a crowd of sorrows, who violently sweep your house empty of its furniture; still treat each guest honorably. He may be clearing you out for some new delight.

The dark thought, the shame, the malice, meet them at the door laughing, and invite them in.

Be grateful for whoever comes, because each has been sent as a guide from beyond.”

As I take in and reflect and contemplate I am learning (again) to depend less on the hope of positive results of my actions, which just may not occur, and to concentrate more on the value and truth of the actions themselves. To remain quiet and open even in the midst of an active life enables us to observe those seeds of burnout that are often sown in how we enter into action and in what we bring with us—our motives, our needs, our expectations, the roles we have for ourselves, and how we manipulate the act around these factors. I'm learning again to see that my best actions are those which I do when I am free from the need to prove myself to myself or to others, and when I am open to God's voice working in me.

Borrowing from the language of Ram Dass, I can say that as my actions become less hostage to my illusions, I can call upon a deeper, more universal source of action, one that is steady, less distracted, more responsive, and less likely to burnout. The same contemplative process that makes it possible for me to note my illusory reasons for acting can also catch me in the process of identifying myself as the actor. I'm beginning (again) to recognize how I'm "taking things too personally." I'm coming to see how my self-esteem is often riding on a particular project or activity, and how invested I am in an action; how each detail must bear my stamp, and how I need to check and confirm every step as if my very sense of identity were at stake. I'm beginning (again) to see a new way. I recall that I've acted in ways different than this before. I've acted in ways where it simply doesn't occur to me that I'm acting at all. Everything flows. I'm all action—without distraction. I'm coming to realize that it's not always my efforts that burn me out; rather, it's where my mind is standing in relation to them. The problem is not the action itself but the degree of my identification with it. It's doers who burn out. But I needn't always be a doer. But I'm not there yet. As I come to a place where my self-identification as the (indispensable) "doer" falls away, much will still be being accomplished. I will still set about my work, perhaps even more productively. It's just that I won't be so personally identified with it or distracted during it anymore. In this more balanced state which I seek to find more consistently, I'll be less likely to be frustrated, to feel resentment, to doubt myself or to burn out.

Certain situations require more focused and sustained attention, yet we have to just keep taking on the next thing that is coming at us 90 miles an hour, it often seems. The thing I've been losing the most has been the necessary time to do constructive/critical evaluation of – and sometimes savor – the moment lived and task accomplished, that are followed immediately – even simultaneously – by another moment and task that demands my attention.

<sup>ii</sup> Mary E. Haddad, "Lent: the new normal" (New York: St. Bartholomew's Church, sermon March 5, 2006).

<sup>iii</sup> Book of Common Prayer, p. 265

<sup>iv</sup> With this in mind, we can better understand the culinary author and Episcopal priest, Robert Capon, when he wrote, "The dieter is condemned to bitter bondage, to a life which dares not let food in. But the faster is a person preparing for a feast." Quoted by Haddad, *Ibid*.

<sup>v</sup> Henri Nouwen, Bread for the Journey (HarperSanFrancisco, 1997), February 27 entry.

<sup>vi</sup> Frank Griswold, "One day at a time" (New York: Episcopal Church, March 1, 2006).

<sup>vii</sup> This doesn't necessarily mean using raw unaccountable power. It can simply be the temptation to have what could be called a "royal consciousness," which can take the form of neglecting those on the margins, or treating them from the basis and prerogatives of your power of privilege.

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<sup>viii</sup> I am indebted to Bishop Roy Cederholm for this trio of alliterative words, “dazzling, dabbling and dominating”

<sup>ix</sup> Parker J. Palmer, The Active Life (HarperSanFrancisco, 1991), pp. 99-119

<sup>x</sup> —a life lived without undue anxiety of failing or succeeding, of receiving criticism or praise, of being accepted or rejected.

<sup>xi</sup> Matthew 6:13

<sup>xii</sup> See Matthew 16:24-26; 18:7; 26:39-41.

<sup>xiii</sup> See also Matthew 18:7; 26:36-46; Hebrews 12:6.

<sup>xiv</sup> See Robert A. Bryant in D. Bartlett and B. B. Taylor, eds. Feasting on the Word (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), Year A, Vol. 2, pp. 45-49