

## First Sunday of Lent – February 22, 2015

Lent always begins with Jesus being driven out into the desert by the Spirit. There, contending with Satan and stalked by wild beasts, Jesus is going to be stripped down, put to the test and, with the help of his better angels, led to discover what is absolutely essential.

As we head out into another Lent ourselves, we might be tempted too. A troublesome temptation for us might boil down to this: “Why bother? Other people aren’t terribly interested in improving themselves. Why should I be the only one that is?” This temptation paints us, like Jesus, as being circled around by wild beasts. It’s a jungle out there. WE can get bitten, stung, mauled and picked apart. Nor do we notice any angels waiting on us. So, we think, my temptation has a point. Why offer the beasts out there a new and improved version of ourselves? Better they should gag on the old one.

But Jesus will not let us off the hook so easily. Such cynicism and self-pity don’t play well with Jesus’ announcement: “This is the time of fulfillment. Reform your life and believe in the Gospel.” So, if we’re more ready to sign on this Lent, where do we begin?

Let’s begin with a Q and A. Question: Why is it so difficult to repent and believe the Gospel – that we are loved by God, and are called to show forth that love in the time and space of earthly life? Answer: Because we harbor so many other beliefs that do not fit into this Good News. So let’s name some of these beliefs. Here we go.

“Health and beauty, money and power are necessary for happiness.” I am identified by my body, personality, and possessions.” “My welfare is more important than yours.” “No one willingly gives up power.” “The world is here for us to exploit.” “There have to be winners and losers.” “I can’t feel good about myself unless I’m better than somebody.” “Some people are supposed to dominate other people.” “If everyone were good, life would be boring”

Of course, we are not always aware we hold these beliefs or even where they come from. What’s crucial, however, is beginning to discover where these beliefs come from. They have not been imposed on us, but we hold them close, more or less firmly. Does this belief or that block up from embracing the Good News of the Gospel? Does this belief or that contradict the Good News of the Gospel?

Repenting and believing in the Gospel is not a project for the beginning of Lent, or even for the whole of Lent. We never finish letting go of false beliefs. It’s really the ordinary drama of every Christian life: the quiet, daily sorting out of options that define us. We are directed inward, then outward, to feel the graces at work, the strength of good habits, the value of honesty and dependability. It slowly adds up to a holiness that exceeds our own efforts. The Holy Spirit is with us and within us, whispering, “This way.” “That way.” “Be patient.” “Act now.”

Jesus begins his public ministry with the words, “Now is the time of fulfillment. The Kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe in the Gospel.”

Words for today; words for a lifetime.