

St. John's Episcopal Church
Hamlin, Pennsylvania
The Rev'd. Ronald Royce Miller, Ph.D.
The First Sunday in Lent
18 February 2018

Scripture readings:

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

There is a kind of joy in shifting gears and approaching a new season by doing things like we just did, like the Litany of Procession, and coming up short on crosses and book holders and all the rest of it. There is importance in gear-shifting, I think, so that we don't just become creatures of habit. I don't think habit is a bad thing either. I think that's frankly one of the things that the Episcopal and Anglican tradition offers that some other traditions may miss in the standard format and behavior of the liturgical life and the liturgical year. If you go to an Episcopal Church here or there you pretty much know what you're going to get because it's a behavior that belongs to everybody.

But on Wednesday we did shift gears. We began Lent with the service here with the imposition of ashes. You may not know this, but on Tuesday night, Shrove Tuesday, we burned the dried-up palms from the previous Palm Sunday, and then on Wednesday morning I took those ashes and put them through a sieve and, to make them stick on your forehead, we always mix a little bit of oil with them. Traditionally it's olive oil, but I just used whatever Wesson was in the kitchen. *[laughter]* Because it was Valentine's Day yours truly added a little bit of honey to the ashes. Kurt Reed said when he went home the cat was happy to lick the ashes off of his face! *[laughter]*

It was an interesting confluence on Wednesday - to contemplate our mortality which is what Ash Wednesday is all about. The message that you often hear here: *Nobody gets out of here alive* - not from this existence. And consequently, Ash Wednesday is really a more somber day than Good Friday, believe it or not, because Ash Wednesday is talking about *our* mortality, the fact that *we* are temporal, that *we* die. And maybe even worse than dying, we grieve the death and loss of those we've loved. Good Friday, on the other hand, is the affirmation to us of God's triumph even over death. We can get cheap and sloppy and sentimental about all of that or, as Christians who engage in the Christian life, really appropriate the absolute message of God's love and forgiveness and God's creative power and God's desire to save and God's promise since the Ark finally hit dry land with the rainbow in the clouds. We can finally appropriate the gospel lesson that draws us back here repetitively over and over and over again, which is good news.

Now at the end of the gospel today we read: "*Now after John was arrested...*" That wasn't good. You know what happened to him. If you really want to see a wonderful interpretation of that piece of scripture, go see Richard Strauss' opera *Salome* sometime, to a libretto written by Oscar Wilde. I remember the great Swedish soprano Birgit Nilsson. During the 60s she was singing *Salome*. There's a dance of seven veils in that opera. I don't know how she did that very well because she was sort of a monstrous Swede. But there is in that opera all of the prurience of human desire and fleshliness and sin as well as the purity of God's intention for humanity in John the Baptizer who's in a well, kept in a cistern, and eventually beheaded. All of that parenthetically. What I really want to think about is after John was arrested Jesus came to Galilee proclaiming the good news of God. This is after Jesus has spent 40 days in the wilderness, tempted by Satan.

Have you ever heard anybody say how awful the world is? How things are worse now than they've ever been? How the devil really has the upper hand? How we're going to hell in a handcart? Well, I guess there has always been difficulty and evil in the world. And I have a suspicion that in Jesus' baptism, which I don't think is much different from your own, when Jesus hears God say, "*You are my beloved child. I am pleased with you.*" The same declaration is made to everybody who is baptized. "*You are my beloved child. With you I am well pleased.*" That's why you get such a big piece of marble here in this font, so that we don't forget what this is all about. This, you know, is a symbol of a couple of things in the life of the Church. In some ancient churches it looks very much like one of the symbols which is a womb. This is where Mother Church breaks water and gives birth to her children - her sons and her daughters. It's also in many cases... You see this at St. Peter's Lutheran Church in Manhattan in New York which is sort of built like a stadium with banked seating. There is a font that is big enough for you and me to get in. It's a large human-sized font, looking for the world like a tomb. So the font is also a tomb in which we believe and teach and confess that if we are buried with Christ in a death like his, we shall certainly be raised with him in a resurrection like his. We might as well get all these images going before we get to Easter because they're going to come full-blast for

us as we go through Lent.

But Jesus, immediately after being baptized and being claimed by God, is sent into the wilderness for 40 days. How have we done with the wilderness the last 40 years, I might ask. How do you deal with the wilderness inside of you? My suspicion is that in the 40 days of being in the wilderness Jesus was beset - and this is not going to be popular among some theologians, but it's an idea I have, and you know I have some crazy ones - that Jesus was beset and put upon and tempted by the wild beasts and the evil within himself, because you and I both know that there are wild beasts and there is evil within each one of us. We're capable of making rational arguments for hateful behavior. We're capable of doing things in the name of Christ which Jesus would never conscience. We are capable of being beset by all kinds of ghosts and ghoulies and goblins from within, and if we're honest we really don't need any help from without. We say this in simple terms when we come to the liturgy. We regularly say it. *"We are by nature sinful and unclean and cannot save ourselves."*

Now there are those who want to believe that Jesus was without sin. They would argue that there could not have been any evil that Jesus would have had to deal with inside of himself. But for him to be valuable to me, I would like to think that the devil he encountered in the wilderness, the wild beasts that he struggled with were within him. But that's not the only thing he dealt with. There were also angels there who ministered to him and waited on him. *After he had that struggle with himself and with the insides of himself, he comes back to Galilee, back to civilization, and he comes back not saying, "Woe is me! The world is going to hell in a handcart. There is evil in all hearts. There is evil in our hearts, mine and yours."* He comes back proclaiming *good news* and saying, *"The time is fulfilled, the kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe in good news!"*

We need to hear that today because so much of what we hear is bad news. And, friends, we make news, and, friends, we can affect the news, and, friends, it's not all false. On Wednesday night I reported to the congregation here that I had encountered in Greentown, just down the road from Dutch's, a billboard that says "HAPPY BIRTHDAY, TRUE FATHER," Next to that Happy Birthday greeting is a large picture of an Asian man in a red baseball cap just like the one you see often in the news. In his right hand sitting on its butt is a large rifle. HAPPY BIRTHDAY, TRUE FATHER - SUN MYUNG MOON, KING OF KINGS. IRON ROD MINISTRIES.

You may or may not know that the organization manufactures firearms. Much of Newfoundland, including the former Roman Catholic Church in Newfoundland, has been bought by that organization, as has been the old pharmacy, lots of acreage. So there is in our midst a "church" which manufactures guns, and which I suppose will not say much about what happened in Florida this week. And many of our legislators won't, despite the fact that we are in a wilderness where the major country in the developed world suffers epidemic abuse of firearms and murder and slaughter of children in schools like no other nation in the world. That is a wilderness with which we have to deal honestly. But there is good news. We can change that. We can affect the news. There is difference that can happen.

My first question is why do you need less preparation to own a gun than you do to drive a car? Now let me tell you something, and this will give you a little insight into my home. The day I received a driver's license my mother said to me, *"Now remember you can kill with that."* I needed a license and training and insurance, and I had to have the thing inspected.

We can proclaim good news by saying we do not have to stay like this. We can change this because we have good news. We do not have to sit here and say, *"Oh well, we're all going to die anyway. We might as well just shoot each other and go to hell."* We have time, energy, effort, influence, guidance, God. We have all of these resources, and we can say we have a culture, a society, a Church that says the world is changed without firearms and without war. We just prayed for peace in that big, long litany. *"Oh, that's not practical,"* you say. And you're right. It may not be practical, but it might be faithful. And there are two extraordinary examples.

Do you remember the name Mahatma Gandhi? He lived in India and that entire country had been imperialized by the British. The British had huge interests in India and were making money hand over fist. They did some good things; they built railroads and all the rest of it, but they were going to govern the people who were there, and that wasn't satisfactory to Gandhi and others who suffered exclusion and systematic poverty, etc. His belief was that change could happen and by his peaceful grasp of the truth and refusal to do anything but suffer the punishments and tortures meted out to him and those who agreed with him publicly, the British finally got the hell out in 1947 without one firearm ever being lifted.

More recently, in our lifetime, Dr. Martin Luther King, who studied Gandhi's technique, led the movement in this country to challenge deeply rooted racism and inequities, many of which still exist, but very, very effectively by not lifting a single firearm managed to change the direction - or at least inform the conscience of some of us in this nation.

Now if you think racism is gone, let me tell you a question I was asked this week relative to Presidents Day. Somebody said to me, "*We used to celebrate Washington's birthday, we used to celebrate Lincoln's birthday. Now we've lumped all the presidents together in one day. Why does he have a day all to himself?*" (meaning Martin Luther King, Jr.) My answer was, "*He wasn't a president.*" Do you get the point of that kind of question? That's how subtle racism is and how deeply woven it is into our psyches and beings and thinking.

Jesus, Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Jr. - all of them human beings with an idea. Add an "I" to that - an *ideal* that things could be better. That idea, that ideal, is in fact, friends, the same good news we are given today - that things can be different, can be better. And we have, in fact, the power to change them as Christian people because the example of Jesus is our prime example. That's where we take our title, our name, our identity from. It's Jesus! We are Christians, little Christs.

We live with all kinds of misery in a wilderness. Opioid addiction - how's that for starters? But the realities we face in terms of society and government, etc., are that the agents of change are going to have to be you and me, little guys in this world who simply continue to speak the truth in love to power and simply say it's not acceptable for me to drop my child off to school in the morning and have to pick up his body at the morgue in the afternoon. It's not acceptable!

Eighteen school shootings in the first 45 days of this year. You, friends, and I have followed Jesus into the wilderness and we're coming out with him this day. That is the Galilee with good news that things, not only can, but *will* be different, and we are not going to lift a gun or a firearm to change them. We are simply going to do what it takes in terms of speaking the truth in love to power and bearing the consequences. And you know the consequences that Jesus bore. He died for what he believed. King died for what he believed. Gandhi died for what he believed. And they dared to believe that was a way better option than living compromised.

Lent is a time for us to reflect on who it is we are as individuals, who it is we are as a society, and who it is we are as a Church and to take what it is we find which is good news to the world.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.