

Spring Training

First Sunday in Lent
The Reverend Nancy R. Easton

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Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

Genesis 9:8-17; I Peter 3:18-22; Mark 1:9-15

Let's pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

Been there, done that. Lent, I mean. You know, taking on an occasional fast, extra devotional reading, ashes on the forehead, the clink of change dropped into the Lenten offering box, the self-denial of some special treat—chocolate, potato chips, ice cream—whatever seems a do-able, reasonable sacrifice to make for roughly six weeks. A number of us in this room have done the Lenten disciplines. If you happen to come from the Roman Catholic tradition, you've had even more to do; perhaps you've abstained from meat on Fridays, relying on those old standbys of fish and macaroni and cheese.

Been there, done that. The deliberate move in Lent to a more simple, penitential worship style: focusing on our sins and our inability to stop our sins, the scripture centered on the path Jesus walks to the cross, the absence of "Alleluias" in our songs as we wait through the darkness before Easter dawn.

Each year, as springtime nears, we take this journey again. Many lessons we hear during Lent are repeats in theme: Jesus' temptation in the wilderness, the call for us to pick up our cross and follow him, and Jesus' prediction of his own death and resurrection. There's not much new here; it's all familiar ground we plow.

So, why plow it? To what end is this journey undertaken? Well, I liked what one devotional reading said . . . that the season of Lent is like baseball's "Spring Training"—a return to the basics to get the players prepared. To mold and shape them into their identity. To build up our strength and endurance for the challenge and rigor of the days to come. Put that in Christian terms, and Lent is the opportunity for us to be molded and shaped by the Spirit into our identity as "children of God," building up strength and endurance for the rigors of what living out that identity brings. Lent is "Spring Training" for Christians.

But don't suppose this time around we'll manage to get it all right. The truth is we'll probably get some of it wrong. Been there, done that? Maybe instead we should say "Will be there again, doing it once more." Sinning, I mean. We tend toward disobedience, we stray from God, we curve in on ourselves and away from our neighbor. It's a daily occurrence.

Reminds me of something my mother told me a few weeks back. She and another elderly neighbor were mutually complaining about how hard it is to drag those garbage cans once a week out to curbside so the collectors can do their collecting. The neighbor said to her, "Yeah, it's garbage day, and you turn around, and it's garbage day again." That pretty much sums up the frequency of sin—turn around, and it's garbage day again. Summer, Fall, Winter, or

Spring—seems like every season is a season of human folly and failure, and the need for training goes on.

Well, it's the First Sunday in Lent. So if "Spring Training" has begun in earnest, in what way is the Holy Spirit about the work of molding us and getting us in shape this day as you and I gather together? Abdominal crunches and bench pressing? Not exactly, but something more aerobic in nature. Consider our Gospel lesson, and see the fast pace of story-telling in Mark's words. I spoke a few weeks ago about the sense of urgency in Mark—really, right from the start, Mark has Jesus racing along at breakneck speed, all the way to Jerusalem and the cross. Just look at our Gospel. There is no time for Jesus to collect his thoughts after he is baptized by John the Baptist, filled with the Holy Spirit, and called "Beloved" by God the Father; no time to contemplate the meaning of such an event. Because immediately the Spirit thrusts Jesus out into the wild, out into a place where beasts live, where isolation reigns, and where Satan tempts. Forty days of that kind of challenge, and when that's over, still no down time. For just as Jesus begins to proclaim a message in Galilee similar to John the Baptist's message, he learns John the Baptist got arrested for that kind of message. So much for the Baptism, for being Beloved, for pleasing God the Father, for any initial enthusiasm Jesus might have had for mission. Instead, Jesus could well be the poster child for one of those "Life Comes at You Fast" commercials. (Don't you love those Nationwide Insurance commercials? My favorite is the one where the father is pushing his young son on a swing. With every push, the child disappears off screen, then swings back on screen at the father who pushes him again. Finally, it's a full-grown teenage boy swinging back, knocking the father over. The point being our kids grow up fast, and we better have Nationwide Insurance.)

It seems to me that one part of our "Spring Training" regimen here involves acknowledging something from Jesus' own experience—that life does come at you fast. Mark gives us only a few sparse paragraphs, but maybe this brevity has a point to it. We are forced to focus on Jesus' immediate move from Baptism to obedience, faithfulness, and servanthood, in the midst of difficulty, in the face of opposition, in the crucible of temptation, all of which could make any one of us want to retreat to the Jordan River and lay low for awhile.

Our lives come at us fast. I'm not referring to the busy schedules we lead, but rather, the surprising events of our lives that erupt when we least expect them, and when we feel least prepared for them. Things happen, and there is little time to rest on our laurels or bask in the glow of our achievements. Little time to relax in the warm bath waters of our Baptism, as if our Baptism is some magic force shield surrounding us like a bubble and protecting us from the struggles of daily living. On the contrary, if anything, at the moment of our Baptism we are already being thrust out into the world by the Holy Spirit—and it's a wilderness out there—we're being propelled out to serve. And God calls us to do it—like Jesus—in the midst of challenges, in the face of opposition, in the crucible of temptation. So, the stories of Jesus' earthly ministry in Mark prepare us this Spring for the ways each of us will be asked to serve on this earth—in obedience, faithfulness, servanthood.

But then there's also our life and work together. As the baptized children of God we are gathered into this particular community of faith where we understand ourselves to be the Body of Christ. A mission statement and a vision of where God is sending us is so needful for us. For to

be the Church in our 21st century culture, in our current economic climate, is a challenge. We may face opposition from within and without as we bear Christ's love and forgiveness to others. We may be tempted to take the easy way out in being the Church—you know, like using our resources solely for ourselves, making Trinity nothing more than a nice place to socialize, or worse yet, an unwelcoming private club for members only. Many of us may wait for someone **else** in this place to step up to the plate in leading, in giving, in service, while we comfortably hang back. But Mark reminds us this Spring we join Jesus on his journey, and he is on the move in the world.

Now, there is a second component to our “Spring Training” regimen. It is the component that ultimately holds us up and sustains us when we've entered the wilderness, when our faith faces threat, when we feel very small and very alone and very vulnerable. And that second component is God's faithfulness.

During the season of Lent, we will hear scripture which speaks of God's steadfast love, God's faithfulness. Today we hear such words. Certainly we hear it in our Gospel lesson, which tells us how the angels ministered to Jesus in the midst of his temptation in the wilderness. (Note how God the Father is never very far away from God the Son!) Then there's our Old Testament lesson and 2nd lesson, which reach back into one of the earliest stories of God's people—the story of Noah and the ark, the story of the flood the Lord God caused to destroy the earth's wickedness in its entirety in order to start creation over. The point at which the lesson from Genesis begins today is when the flood has done its destruction, and Noah and his family have exited the ark and begun life on solid ground again. The Lord God places a bow in the sky—naturally, we think of it as a colorful rainbow caused by raindrops and sunlight, but in truth, the sense is that this is an archery bow a warrior would wield, a bow of power, now placed in the sky, aimed upward, pointed **away** from God's creatures. The Lord God places the bow there, and the writer of Genesis has God speak with an amazing amount of repetition in these verses: “. . . I establish my covenant with you, that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of a flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth . . . This is the sign of the covenant . . . I have set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth . . . I will remember my covenant . . . the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all flesh . . . When the bow is in the clouds, I will see it and remember the covenant . . . This is the sign of the covenant that I have established . . .”

Just how many times must the Lord God repeat himself here? As many times as needed to remind himself—and us—of his loving commitment to the future of his creation, to you and me and all people. You and I, in season and out, cannot seem to change the way we are—sinful, disobedient, weak. But the Lord God purposes to change himself in order to have us in his life, in order to give us life. The Lord God purposes never to allow his righteous anger and rightness to judge to get in the way of his gracious relationship with us. The flood has happened. Been there, done that, says God. But God says he will never do that again.

This is not simply resignation on God's part that we humans will be what we will be, and he's willing to go along with it. No, this is about God's promise to find a new way to confront our sin and all that would keep us from God. That new way is Jesus Christ. That new way is made clear in our 2nd lesson, which tells us to return to our baptismal waters. Not in order to find that force

shield or protective bubble, but so that a flood of grace from the cross of Christ will daily drown our sinful selves, and then propel us up to the surface again, forgiven and strengthened to serve in a challenging world. I guess you could say it's "Spring Training" time again. **AMEN.**

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