

Year B – Lent 1 – 18 February 2018
Genesis 9:8-17; Mark 1:9-15

Like our lives, the seasons of the Church weave us back and forth from new life to death and then eternal life, from happiness into despair and back out again. As we move from Christmas to Easter, we live through Epiphany, a season filled with the ordinary and then we enter into Lent, a season of reflection and wondering, difficulties and sorrow, which then, eventually lead us on to new life in Easter. At no point in the Church year, or in the teachings of the Church are we ever given any guarantees or promises that everything will be all good and wonderful. We were never, as Lynn Anderson crooned in the 70's, "promised a rose garden." Quite to the contrary, what we were promised was a garden in which there is an empty tomb, but before we can get there, we have to discover for ourselves who was placed in that tomb in the first place.

This season of Lent is very much about discovering who was placed in that tomb and then doing the hard work of letting him into our lives so that, when he emerges from the tomb, we too can emerge with him. It is not an easy thing that we are called to do for the next 6 weeks. If it were, there would be more people seated in these pews. But for those who have chosen to be in a church like this on this first Sunday of Lent, the hard work to come will be an endeavor well worth the effort. For with discipline and reflection and difficult lessons come the gift of truly knowing that you have walked your Lenten journey with Jesus and you understand in a deeper way just what this walk with Jesus is all about, in its entirety.

There are times when it seems that we fall upon rough patches and it feels like we have bad luck or we have stumbled upon misfortune. In the life of the average Christian it is easier to believe that bad things have just happened to us and we are simply called to endure them until we are either rescued or the tough times pass over us. It is not easy to acknowledge that, from time to time, these rough seasons may not be accidental or bad luck but sometimes are indeed exactly where God has led us as we walk the path of our individual faith journeys.

In the Gospel lesson this morning we are reminded that sometimes God's incredible love for us will lead us into situations in which we truly struggle to discover His purpose, let alone remember that He is indeed with us.

Immediately after Jesus had been baptized and God had pronounced that Jesus was indeed His Son, the Beloved, with whom He was well pleased, we hear that the Holy Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness, where, over 40 days and nights he was tempted by Satan.

There is something quite discomfoting in hearing that Jesus was, like Job, led by the Spirit into such a wretched atmosphere and experience. This is not the way we like to think about God. The God we usually think about is one who leads us out of temptation, danger and despair. Not one who intentionally exposes us to these wicked things. What do we do with this God who doesn't simply swoop in and fix things, protecting and guiding us at the slightest wrong?

We could, like a spoiled child, rail against Him, denying Him because He seemingly turned His back on us ... Or we could continue to place our whole trust in him, believing that if we are here, then God is still with us, even if we cannot feel His presence. We can allow ourselves to experience and grow through the difficulties, knowing that through Christ all things are made new.

When we allow ourselves to face the reality we are living in, and at the same time, continue to turn to God, even when it seems He is absent, we will find that in retrospect our journey was worth every moment, especially the most difficult ones. Like Lynn Anderson's song, "along with the sunshine there's gotta be a little rain sometime." It is often the toughest of times and circumstances that teach us the truest of life's, and faith's, lessons. How would we learn to be faithful to God and to accept the love Christ gives us through his sacrifice if we never learned firsthand what it means to sacrifice ourselves? True appreciation comes from true experience.

When I was in grade eleven, my grandmother died on Christmas Day. I had the faith of a teenager – on again, off again. I was very much a fair-weather Christian at that time. When things were good, then I believed that God was good. When things were bad, I'm afraid I didn't really think about God at all. Things (meaning my attitude) got so bad after my grandmother's death, that my mom called our Parish Priest to our home to have a heart-to-heart chat with me. It was not a shining moment for me. I threw at Reverend Buckingham the most popular answer as to why I refused to go to church. I told her I could just as easily talk to God by myself on a Sunday morning as I walked in the park, all by myself.

Her response sank in, after a long while. First, she asked me if I was indeed going for long walks in the park on Sunday morning, or just sleeping in... Then she told me something that I have never forgotten. She told me that while I could indeed talk to God while walking alone in the park, God, on the other hand, most often responds back by speaking through the people in the Church community. God did not need me to be in Church. I needed me to be in Church.

For quite a while I considered that when things got tough, God got going – far away from me. So I got far away from God.

Fast forward about ten years ... God worked through people and circumstances in such a way that I found myself in first year seminary – not intending to become a priest, but more learning and discovering all about this "God thing". Toward the end of my first year, during Lent, I found myself going through some very difficult times. At the time I believed that I was struggling with anxiety but looking back on that time I believe now that I was being poked and prodded by Satan.

Unlike ten years earlier, this time I did not abandon all hope in God's presence. Time and again I found myself on my knees in the dark and silent chapel, kneeling at the altar, repeating the Lord's Prayer and asking God to give me the strength to walk through whatever was happening. Once in a while, I would feel a glimmer of hope wash over me just to be replaced by a wildness of despair.

When Holy Week arrived I awoke one night to find myself at my own Golgotha. (That may seem dramatic but there is no other way to express it.)

Throughout Holy Week I spent every moment I could in church: the university chapel, my family church, my field placement church, wherever the Sacrament of the Eucharist was being offered, I was there. You see, unlike ten years before, this time I believed that God could indeed be present with me and the only tangible form I could see was in the body and blood of Christ.

At no point during that longest of weeks did I ever believe that God had abandoned me. I did, however, come to understand that God had led me, like Jesus and Job, into the presence of that which would test me the most. Only when I had come face to face with evil and *then* learned to walk away from it and place my complete trust in God was I able to take that next step in my own faith journey and begin the process of vocational questioning: was I really called by God to become a priest.

That vocational journey began long before I realized that it did. I just became aware of it when God determined that the easy path was no longer challenging enough for me to truly learn from it. It was in that desert experience, both facing all that I was afraid of *and* knowing that God was the one responsible for leading me there, that I truly began to grow up in my faith and begin the journey, which is still ongoing, of discernment for what God was, and is, calling me to in this life.

While we certainly were not promised a rose garden and we do indeed need some rain sometime, Lynn Anderson's song (written incidentally by Joe South) does have one thing wrong. She sings that "You'd better look before you leap still waters run deep And there won't always be someone there to pull you out". This, for those who choose to believe is patently not true. God is always there to pull us out. He may deem that we need to flounder, and even learn to swim, but we are never left alone without divine assistance.

The question remains though: have we allowed ourselves to walk into the desert and experience the difficult times so that we will truly trust that God will be there when we call?

Maybe that is the work we need to do this Lent. Maybe we all need to reflect on our lives and do the work of recognizing those seasons when God's Spirit has led us out into the desert, for our own good.

This Lenten work will not be easy or comfortable but it is worth every step, every prayer, every cry. And when we have done that work, we too will find ourselves emerging from that tomb with Jesus into a bright and glorious Easter morning that has not only roses but everything beautiful that God has ever created - including us ...