

No Holding Back

Matthew 4.1-11 (The Message)

March 13, 2011
First Sunday in Lent

I believe in all that has never yet been spoken. I want to free what waits within me so that what no one has dared to wish for may for once spring clear... May what I do flow from me like a river, no forcing and no holding back, the way it is with children. Then in these swelling and ebbing currents, these deepening tides moving out, returning, I will sing you as no one ever has, streaming through widening channels into the open sea.

- Rainer Maria Rilke

Next Jesus was taken into the wild by the Spirit for the Test. The Devil was ready to give it. Jesus prepared for the Test by fasting forty days and forty nights. That left him, of course, in a state of extreme hunger, which the Devil took advantage of in the first test: "Since you are God's Son, speak the word that will turn these stones into loaves of bread." Jesus answered by quoting Deuteronomy: "It takes more than bread to stay alive. It takes a steady stream of words from God's mouth." For the second test the Devil took him to the Holy City. He sat him on top of the Temple and said, "Since you are God's Son, jump." The Devil goaded him by quoting Psalm 91: "He has placed you in the care of angels. They will catch you so that you won't so much as stub your toe on a stone." Jesus countered with another citation from Deuteronomy: "Don't you dare test the Lord your God." For the third test, the Devil took him to the peak of a huge mountain. He gestured expansively, pointing out all the earth's kingdoms, how glorious they all were. Then he said, "They're yours—lock, stock, and barrel. Just go down on your knees and worship me, and they're yours." Jesus' refusal was curt: "Beat it, Satan!" He backed his rebuke with a third quotation from Deuteronomy: "Worship the Lord your God, and only him. Serve him with absolute single-heartedness." The Test was over. The Devil left. And in his place, angels! Angels came and took care of Jesus' needs.

Most journeys begin quietly, inconspicuously, and unheralded. This is especially true of our annual Lenten journey. The first steps are tentative, the mood ambiguous, and the will wavering at best. This tendency is insured by the somber mood set on Ash Wednesday. We speak of dust and ashes on this day; we confess our sin and seek to repent of the darkness in our lives. This symbolism is not in itself somber, it is a reminder that all we have - and all we are - is a gift from God; a reminder that we depend on God for all things. As our folk filed by for the

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imposition of ashes on Wednesday, I reminded them of something very important; so important it bears repeating today. As I inscribed the cross on their foreheads with ashes made from last year's palms, I told them that while the ashes remind us of our need for God, the cross reminds us that God is always with us.

Ash Wednesday sets the tone, so even though Lent began late this year, with signs of spring visible all around, we still tend to associate it with the lamentations of winter rather than the hope of spring. If that is not enough, today's gospel reading features peril, conflict, and temptation; Jesus tempted by his own inner demons, tempted in serious and sobering ways... it's enough to make us think our Lenten journey is going to be nothing but struggle; a time to buckle down, work hard, and pray feverishly as we confess our brokenness to God. Yes ma'am, we tend to think of Lent as a dark and somber spiritual journey.

I am convinced that we are wrong to think of Lent in this way. The Lenten journey has no more to do with darkness and somber attitudes than confession has to do with groveling on the ground like a worthless worm. Lent revolves around a journey toward God, with God present all along the way. Thus, Lent should begin with joy and exuberance. Lent is the journey we begin when we accept God's invitation to walk with him to Jerusalem and beyond; to Golgotha, yes, but to the empty tomb beyond the gates of Jerusalem as well. Will there be temptation along our journey? Yes there will. Just as Jesus was tempted, we will be tempted in many ways; tempted to leave the path of faith altogether, to give up on God's companionship; tempted to elevate our needs above the needs of others, and to leave them to fend for themselves; even tempted to see our own lives as futile and beyond redemption.

You can bet we'll be tempted. There will be times we'll feel oppressed by the darkness in our own hearts; weighed down by the brokenness that afflicts us and makes us feel powerless; but this is not what defines and guides our Lenten journey. Lent is defined by extravagant faith. That's right, extravagant faith. It was not a timid, weak, and somber faith that empowered Jesus to stand up to his temptation. Rather, it was an extravagant faith. It was his willingness to hold nothing back from God, as Rilke says. It was his willingness to jump in full throttle, no holds barred, Katy bar the door! When Jesus began his Lenten journey, he put it all on the line; he gave everything he had.

Jesus stood up to his temptation by means of an extravagant faith, and so it will be with us if we will not hold back. We'll be able to rise above temptation; we'll be able to acknowledge and give over to God our brokenness, our wounded hearts; we'll be able to rise above the darkness and continue our journey in joy, celebration, and creativity.

The only question for us is how and where to obtain such an exuberant, extravagant faith. How can we walk not only the path Jesus walked, but the manner in which Jesus walked? Such faith arises from the recognition that while we are wounded, we are not destroyed; while we are broken, we are not beyond repair. I mentioned above that confession is not about groveling on the ground like worthless worms. This is because we are not worms, and we are not worthless. This is because beneath our wounded nature, beneath all the brokenness and fear, lies the mark of God's creation; goodness. We are not worthless creatures that need, miraculously, to be made worthy; we are not pitch dark, absolute darkness in need of light; we are God's creation, the work of God's loving hands. We have the image of God so deeply imbedded in who we are that it can never be taken away.

God doesn't want us to grovel like worms; rather, God wants us to acknowledge, recognize, and build on the goodness that lies within. God wants us, as Rilke says, to free what waits within, things that no one has dared to wish for that spring clear when we hold nothing back. God wants us realize the image that lies within by giving ourselves with abandon and the exuberance of faith to the journey of faith. And if we will, it will be a journey of light, a journey of joy, a journey of celebration.

This is why we can break with tradition today and begin Lent as a celebration of joy. This is why we can begin Lent with an extravagant faith, holding nothing back from God. Some say we hold back from fear of what God will ask of us; I say we hold back from fear of how much God can do through us. We have some sense of the goodness within; we have some sense of the creativity within; we have some sense of the joy and wonder of life; we have some sense of the wonderful things God can accomplish through us... and it scares us to death. So I challenge you – I challenge us all – to leave behind the somber attitude, the muted prayer, the tentative steps, and the meager expectations. I challenge us all to throw ourselves into faith, to hold nothing back, and to give ourselves to God with exuberance, celebration, and joy!