

“Renouncing the Devil”

Mark 1: 9-13

Lent 1B, Boise, 2021 [after Windsor, Colorado, 2009]

Lent reminds us that the Christian life is a journey. After Christ’s baptism and Spiritual anointing, “the Spirit immediately drove Him out into the wilderness.” And that’s where we are this first Sunday of the season, in the wilderness with Christ, whose forty days there with “wild animals” recall an earlier, longer journey — the forty years of wandering of the children of Israel before their entrance into the Promised Land. They entered, Christ entered, and so should we strive to enter, continuing the journey of faith until it is completed. The Bible is full of stories about persons making journeys, some of them short and straight (like Christ’s) and some of them long and meandering (like the Children of Israel’s following the Exodus). The point is, of course, to get there, to the Promised Land.

We will continue the journey, and arrive at our destination, if we maintain our faith. No one acts on a promise, unless he or she really believes it. No one walks toward a land he has not seen, unless he is convinced that land really awaits him at the journey’s end. Faith requires an affirmation of God’s promises, and that they apply to us. It requires that we put our trust in God’s Word, because it has been spoken by One who is always trustworthy. You have heard that said many times before, and we preachers cannot say it too often. Faith is trust in God’s Word, and requires one to affirm and embrace the Word in a way that enables one to act on it — and to continue acting on it for the rest of one’s life.

But there is also another side to faith, the side we emphasize during Lent, and that is renunciation. Yes, renunciation, as well as affirmation, is necessary

for Biblical faith. Faith, at first glance, seems to be all about ideals. When a person takes God at his Word and believes that God will deliver on the promises He has made, he or she begins to hope for “things not seen,” things that lie beyond the present world. That is certainly the essence of faith — believing in the unseen, living for the future — but faith also has its realistic side. A genuine Christian faith does not take us into a never-never land of fantasy. It acknowledges the reality that we don’t in truth gain anything without giving up something else. We don’t affirm any truth without rejecting something else as false. Faith is an either/or decision. If we follow Christ, we must leave the Devil. If we embrace the Kingdom, we must renounce the world. If we want eternal life, then we must sooner or later learn to give up everything in our lives that is not eternal. There are probably some things in our life that can be enjoyed eternally, because they come from God’s good creation, which He has promised to restore. But there are probably a lot of other things in our life that will *not* survive the fires on Judgment Day and must be got rid of, lest we burn with them. Hence, follow the example of the Ninevites. Repent and be saved. Unburden yourselves of the things that weigh you down, and make your way straight — straight to the Kingdom!

Both the Gospel and Epistle today mention Baptism — the Gospel Christ’s and the Epistle our own, along with the event in the OT that is one of Baptism’s types (or foreshadowings), the washing of Noah’s Ark with a forty-day rain. Our OT reading describes the covenant God made with His creation following the Flood. In Christian Baptism, the believer joins the People of God under the New Covenant.

To see the two sides of faith and how they work together, we can return to the event of our baptism, when we, either by ourselves or by our sponsors, made both affirmations and renunciations. Christ’s baptism preceded the

renunciations, His saying “no” to the Devil in the wilderness. For us the renunciations come first, even before the affirmations made at the time of baptism; for when a man or woman is reborn, he or she must first die. When a person is converted, he or she turns away from things that will lead to Hell, in order that he or she might embrace the things that will lead to Heaven. For the fact is that human beings are so constituted that they have eyes on only one side of their heads. They cannot look both forward and aft. If we want to see what is behind us, we must turn. We must change our direction. We must abandon the view we possess initially, along with all the things that tempt us to move in that direction, in order that we might possess the view that, at the beginning of life, lies behind us. The Christian religion teaches that every son of Adam and daughter of Eve is born into the world in need of a reorientation. If he or she does not become reoriented, he or she will soon become lost.

Let me now read for you the renunciations that a believer makes at his or her baptism, or that the godparents make on behalf of him or her for an infant.

Do you renounce the devil and all the spiritual forces of wickedness that rebel against God?

Do you renounce the empty promises and deadly deceits of this world that corrupt and destroy the creatures of God?

Do you renounce the sinful desires of the flesh that draw you from the love of God?

And the response to each of those three questions that a person must make in order to proceed to the baptism is, “I renounce them.” He or she renounces the Devil, the world, and the flesh.

Then, *after* the candidate has made those renunciations, *after* he or she has forsaken the way of death by making the necessary about-face, he or she is then in a position to affirm life.

Do you turn to Jesus Christ and confess him as your Lord and Savior?

Do you joyfully receive the Christian Faith, as revealed in the Holy Scriptures . . . ?

Will you obediently keep God's holy will and commandments, and walk in them all the days of your life?

And the responses? "I do," "I do," and "I will, the Lord being my helper" [2019 BCP, pp. 164-65]. — And all that is repeated at Confirmation or Reception.

When we renounce all that is opposed to God, then we can affirm God. When we say "no" to the Devil and his lies, we can then say "yes" to the truth. When we vow earnestly to crucify the old, rotten, dying humanity that we have inherited from Adam on the Cross of Christ, then we can begin to live anew in the glorious humanity of His Resurrection.

The penitential season of Lent developed out of the catechumenate of the ancient Church, specifically the pre-Easter fast of those preparing for baptism at the Easter Vigil. When the blessed night finally arrived, they made their vows of renunciation and spit westward at the Devil. Then they made their about-face, looking to the east, whence Our Lord told His disciples He would come again. They made the affirmation of faith and entered the baptistery one-by-one. The clothes had to come off; for symbolically they were removing from themselves the world. Each candidate was dunked three times by the bishop in the enclosed pool, anointed with oil, and then given a fresh, white tunic. When the baptisms were completed — perhaps several hours' worth — they processed into the church with their candles lit to participate in their first Eucharist, the Banquet of the Kingdom.

Reviewing that elaborate procedure for Baptism in the ancient writings, I get the impression that people were serious about their faith. Becoming a Christian was not a matter of hedging one's bets. Either you were in, or you were out. It

was the world or the Kingdom; the old, smelly tunic or the fresh, white one made of pure linen. Leave the demons behind, gasping in the west wind. Take those old clothes and burn them. After a bath in Christ's death, you must put on fresh. Now head down to the sanctuary for your Heavenly Food, the ambrosia of the saints.

The Liturgy must end, of course, and we find that we are still in the world. But, having bathed and having eaten, how are we now to live in it? As settlers or as pilgrims? Remember that Lent signifies a journey through the wilderness with Christ. When you stop moving with Him and notice that you are in danger of settling, that is the time to renounce the place you are in.

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