

Lent 1 B
Genesis 9:8-17
Mark 1:9-15
March 1, 2009

Sermon preached by Laura Merrill
Wimberley UMC
Notes not for publication

You know, it's funny how quickly we Texans can switch the thermometer from heat to AC, and then back again. This last week my yankee husband about had a conniption fit—89 degrees in February! So—many of us crank the AC, because we really feel that heat coming on all of a sudden. We could put up with a whole lot more than we do; even I remember not having central air. But rather than conditioning the air, I think it's we who become conditioned; our comfort range gets pretty narrow, maybe about a 10 degree range, and we prefer to be insulated from any extremes. And that kind of conditioning we can allow to extend to other parts of our lives too, to protect us from other sorts of things. And when it comes to our life with God, that kind of protection is not always our friend.

Lent is a time when we can move out of our insulated cocoon to look at our lives with a new perspective. I want to give just a brief review of what the season of Lent is, since we're all still learning. Lent is a period of forty days that Christians in some branches of the church, like this one, spend in preparation for Easter. The word "Lent" means "Spring" and comes from a root that means long, as days in the spring begin to lengthen. The forty days of Lent do not include Sundays, since Sunday is always a "little Easter." So if at some point you get bored, you can count from last Wednesday, Ash Wednesday, and see if that comes out right. The forty days correspond to the amount of time Jesus spent in the wilderness, and of course many other Biblical stories

as well, stories about people on a journey that taught them something important—it rained for forty days and forty nights before God sent the rainbow; Moses spent forty days on Mt. Sinai, and the people of Israel spent forty years in the desert.

The purpose of these days of Lent is self-reflection and examination. In the early days of the church, people fasted and prayed and studied in preparation for baptism, taking on what we've come to call disciplines. The word "discipline" comes from the Latin term for instruction or learning, and in the church we call a discipline anything we do or keep from doing as part of our faith life. Disciplines are an intentional pattern we take on—coming to worship on Sunday is a discipline, offering our gifts to God, praying or reading the Bible, attending the Wednesday night study or Sunday School—all are Christian disciplines.

Fasting is a Christian discipline too, one we're less familiar with in our day. Lent as a time of fasting, or abstaining, whether from food or something else, has come to be known by many as a Catholic thing, a time when you give up something because you have to and kind of just white-knuckle it through until Sundays, when you get to break the fast, since Sundays aren't part of Lent. The real finish line, of course, is Easter, when ostensibly you get to go back to doing whatever you please. That going-through-the-motions approach to discipline is not what is intended by the Catholic tradition, and it's not what we're aiming for, either.

Instead, taking on a Lenten discipline should be a way of looking inside, a way of learning something new about ourselves. We start with self-examination and reflection. Maybe you look at your life and feel the instinct that your attachment to coffee or

chocolate or the internet is more than you'd like it to be. (I would never feel that way about those things, but you might.) Or maybe it's something else, and you find that you've ordered your days around it. And you might also notice that you're not doing other things that you say are also important to you—a daily time of prayer or silence, maybe, or downtime with the kids. You see these things, and you begin to wonder. And you begin to ask, why is it this way, and does this feel like the life I want? This is the first step—stopping long enough to examine our lives to see where we've let the power get concentrated, and reflecting on what we find. It's stopping long enough to let God use our wondering to suggest the possibility of a new way.

So what might the new way be? If you decide you want to give up TV at night, you might replace it with something else, like writing a letter or reading a book. Instead of shopping for more stuff you don't need, you might make a second-mile offering for the poor or the hungry—go online to learn about where the UMC is at work in the world and the kinds of help all of us are making possible through our gifts. Even if you don't give something up, you can take something else on. Pray for the confirmation class every day. Call or go and visit that person you used to see here in church but don't anymore. Follow through on one of those good intentions that we let pop up and then slip away. And you never know, that might be one Lenten discipline that lasts past Easter.

Whatever you might decide to do or not do, it's important to remember that Lenten discipline is not "Prove Yourself to Jesus" time, nor is it repentance as fire insurance, nor a Get Out of Hell Free card. And that's a good thing, because I will

confess to you that I have spent more than one Lenten season trying to give something up or start something new, basically stuck in thinking all the time about whatever it was and how I wasn't doing it right and how terrible I was. And that just didn't seem too productive—most of us already feel bad enough about ourselves. Instead, Lent is a time to strip our lives of their insulation, to chew through the cocoon we've woven around ourselves and weren't planning on leaving. Lent is a time to be in touch with our own frailty, which is the first step in learning to rely on the grace of God.

This is what the wilderness is for. Every Lent begins with the story of Jesus in the wilderness, tempted by Satan, as the story puts it. This year's account comes from Mark, which is sparse and tells nothing of the nature of Jesus' temptations. For this gospel writer, those details are unimportant. The important thing is that the hardships of the desert make it a place of journey and discovery. And Jesus went there before beginning his public ministry, to walk before us the way he knew we too would have to walk. If we want to follow Jesus, we will all end up in the wilderness.

Those of you who were here for worship last week had the extraordinary experience of watching our kids share the Godly Play program with us. And one thing Godly Play kids are familiar with is the desert box. The desert box is flat and filled with sand; it's not the whole desert, the kids are told, but just a piece of the desert. There are also other reminders the kids hear before any desert story, and they are profound in their truth, profound in their description of the desert as an un-insulated setting: "The desert is a wild and dangerous place. It's very hot in the daytime, and it's very cold at night. Sometimes the wind blows, and it blows so much that it completely

changes the way things look. It's easy to get lost in the desert."

The wilderness is a place where some things will die, cut off from the source that has fed and watered them. But that's not always a bad thing. Death is the underlying reality during Lent: the death that we know awaits Christ down the road; the mortality each of us lives with every day; and the death Jesus calls us to at the level of our hearts, death of the parts of us that resist the love of God. Death is organically related to life, and can even serve as its complement.

A couple of weeks ago I told you about a woman I've been visiting who's under hospice care at her sister's here in town. It was to be one of those hot days last week, but the morning was cloudy and cool, and they had the windows open. There was a gauzy, old-fashioned linen curtain partially drawn across the window, letting in light and floating up and down with the breeze entering the room. I was there because the woman had said she was ready; she was done. And I looked at the curtain and felt the calm, the un-insulated air, the peace this dying person and her family were allowing to rest in that room. And even as the angels waited on Jesus in the desert, I'm sure they were waiting on her as well.

The extremes of the wilderness can look a lot of different ways. It may look like job cuts at work, or a dwindling bank account. It may look like a hospital bed or the fresh grave of a loved one. Or it may be lesser, voluntary hardships that we choose to pursue, to draw closer to Christ. Whatever the form, we have the opportunity to let the winds of the desert change the landscape for us, change what we see in ourselves and what we believe about the power of God. God in Christ offers us this day the chance

for a new life and asks only that we follow, that we pay attention, that we let our protection drop. Take some time to reflect and choose a discipline by which to keep the season of Lent. For "the time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news."