

3-5-17 "If You Are..." A Reflection on Mt. 4:1-11 by Mark Arbisi on the First Sunday of Lent, Christ Church, KBK

I shouldn't say so, as it expresses an improper if not impious sentiment, but here goes anyway, Ash Wednesday at Christ Church was "great!" A fun time was had by all... may the wrath of God have mercy on my soul. As we all know, "great, good times" stuff is supposed to be reserved for before Lent and after Lent, not so much during Lent. But hey, we're church people... we're supposed to have fun. It's God's Will for our lives. That's why we do all the crazy stuff that we do... like treating ourselves to special times like, well, Fat Tuesday.

If for any reason you missed the rip-roaring good times on Ash Wednesday then I certainly hope that you enjoyed yourself on Fat Tuesday. As you may know, Fat Tuesday is also known as *Mardi Gras*. *Mardi Gras* is French for Fat Tuesday. Although some of us just call that particular Tuesday "Pancake Tuesday" because traditionally pancakes were enjoyed for supper the day before Lent because it was the last chance to use up all the dairy and eggs in the house, as during Lent people abstained from the more "pleasurable" foods. Giving up a token of pleasure became a daily sacrifice reminding the faithful who and whose we are. Which of course means, we're God's people, brothers and sisters all, one family, one body. Which is way cool.

Anyway, here's trusting you had a good one. As for myself, I confess I failed to pig out on pancakes—may God have mercy on my soul—but I'm forgiven I'm sure. I say that because I did enjoy a fair amount of chocolate. More specifically, Maine style chocolate, yes I'm talking whoopie pies. My Renee baked whoopie pies on Fat Tuesday, so I went to bed stuffed full of chocolately-goopy pies. And yes, we used up our pleasurable eggs and dairy. Besides, whoopie pies are infinitely superior to pancakes... everybody in Maine knows that. So yes, you guessed it, this means I'm giving up whoopie pies for Lent.

I know, I know it's one heck of a sacrifice, but someone has to do it. Besides, as God knows, I'm doing it for God. Which has nothing to do with whoopie pies *per se*... cuz I can't imagine that God really cares much about what I do or don't do with whoopie pies. I mean, come on. But I do believe God wishes me to eat reasonably well and be reasonably healthy which is a much larger issue than whoopie pies... and a significant part of that good health God wills for me, and for you, has to do with spiritual health. And of course that is the whole point of Lent, being mindful of God's will for us and being mindful of the things I do, we do, you do to make God's will a reality in our life, in our world. And yes, so much of that involves sacrifices, joyous sacrifices carried out in partnership with God as we endeavor together to makes God's world a better world for everyone. Which again is way cool (did I tell you Lent is my favorite time of the year?).

Lent is so abundantly obviously important. Because if I'm not mindful, if I'm just too busy to be mindful of things and issues and well God too, all such things much larger than myself, then my little needs would become my big obsessions, and I'd grow myopic and nearsighted, and I'd think only of myself, and then easily I'd fall liable to concentrating my time and energy mostly on all the whoopie pies I could hoard and store and freeze and utterly enjoy and get all engrossed over, and then blissfully live out all my days thinking of no one else and nothing else than the next batch of Renee's fresh whoopie pies coming my way. And you know, having spelled it out as I just did, I can think of nothing less tasteful than total self-indulgence. For the record I should add, as I'm in a confessional state of mind, I stretched the rules a wee little bit. Just a little. Come Ash **Wednesday** morning I indulged in whoopie pies for breakfast. But please, don't tell anyone. I'm not proud. It is rather embarrassing actually.

All of which brings me squarely around to today, **Stewardship Sunday**. Because stewardship responsibilities are generally thought to be related to sacrifices, although one doesn't necessarily need to do so. But we think that way I'm thinking because there is something about digging into our purse or wallet or savings account for reasons other than buying some service or product for ourselves that strike us as some kind of a sacrifice. For whatever reason we tend to call moments that aren't all about us a sacrifice... which I happen to think is both sadly understandable and more than a bit odd because clearly serving God is a tremendous joy and great honor.

The point is, odd or not, people do indeed make all kinds of sacrifices for God, which really means for the people God loves; and the even larger point is this: The way God behaves is how God expects us to behave. Our generous behavior is what God gets in exchange for all God gives us, all that we don't have to dig into our purse or wallet or savings account to receive. Indeed, all that stuff and all those things which God gives and we don't have to crack open the piggy bank to receive is pretty high on the list of things we talk about here in Church. We don't wait for the next **Stewardship Sunday** to roll around to remind ourselves of how, when we do what God does we actually grow in grace, experience expanding horizons, and more and more resemble the extravagant lover who is beyond extravagant with gift-giving. And yes we fully recognize just how undeserving of all this we are, and so too, on a regular basis we speak of, acknowledge and celebrate God's unmerited grace to each of us—we know we're not deserving of all the riches we receive but the goodies just keep getting poured out on us daily anyway. So naturally we do our part trying to keep up with God's generous outpourings.

A favorite preacher, teacher, author of mine, Barbara Brown Taylor, shares a wonderful description of how Lent came to be. She writes, "Many years after Jesus had not returned as quickly as expected the followers of Jesus had learned to accommodate their lives to the surrounding culture, finding no contradiction between being comfortable and being Christian." Far from being bold witnesses challenging the powers that be on behalf of the least of these, Taylor says, "our ancestors in faith decided to be nice instead of holy and God moaned out loud" (from a sermon titled "Lenten Discipline").

So she explains, in response to this woeful state of affairs, the church looked deeply within itself and "created Lent as a springtime of the soul," a time of new spiritual life and new spiritual beginnings. Much as we recognize the need for Spring-cleaning, the early Church initiated a period for spiritual spring cleaning, as Taylor explains, the Church offered "forty days to cleanse the system and open the eyes to what remains when all comfort is gone, to live by the grace of God alone and not by what we can supply ourselves."

Connecting Lent to today's Gospel Lesson, she recalls her own time spent in the desert, a place "so big, so quiet, so empty that you cannot help noticing how small and perishable you are. You remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return. You wish you had someone to distract you from that fact, or at least someone to talk to about it. Anyone but the devil, that is." Which no doubt helps explain why Lent isn't the most popular Church season even when it is the most decisive one.

Yes, there is indeed a devilish aspect to Lent. It is always a devil of a thing to be tested, to be tempted, to be pushed to the extreme, yet as God so led Jesus the Church of God so leads each of us into just such a desert place. When our lives diverge from the image and behavior of Christ, when our lives go down paths that only open separation between us and God, when something like Lent comes along and draws attention to that empty space and invites us to "turn around" to repent and begin anew, yes, it can be experienced as a devil of a thing but ultimately as a springtime of the soul. Naturally, one must journey the journey to arrive at Springtime.

It is most revealing that Jesus too had his springtime of the soul moment with the devil. To be holy and grace filled is to wrestle with evil; to be indifferent is to give the devil no mind. This time through our lesson what stood out for me was how the devil kept saying "*If you are... if you are... if you are the Son of God.*" Meaning, if you are the person your baptism proclaims that you are; meaning if you are God's child, God's beloved, if there is any truth to any of it then prove it. Of course the devil had a perverted perspective on what it means to be God's beloved. The pressure on Jesus then is the same on each of us today; it's the twisted thinking that being Christian somehow makes life easier, better, privileged, and perhaps even entitled. When in fact our baptisms proclaim pretty much the opposite

of that, that we are in fact sacrificial people who have dedicated our lives to serving God. And of course, each of Jesus' rebuttal to his desert companion made that point.

Each and every time Jesus was tempted to place his baptism on a shelf, tempted to brush aside his relationship with God, tempted to ignore who and whose he was, Jesus remembers the Word of God. In other words, He responds to life's many challenges by claiming, strength, comfort, assurance, affirmation of God's providence by turning to scripture. "Yes, Mr. Devil," says Jesus, "I am indeed who my baptism proclaims me to be because *it is written...it is written...it is written.*" And then devil retreated as the devil always will when confronted by a resolve to be gracious and generous in all manner of things. And then, and I truly love this part, then "*the angels came and waited on Jesus.*" Then, God provided. When trust in God is present God always provides, the angels always come rushing in; good begets good, grace begets grace, generosity begets generosity—it's a God thing.

Friends, as people of faith our goal in life, our goal when confronted with temptations, our goal through thick and thin is to be gracious and generous in all manner of things. It's what our baptisms proclaim us to be; it's what our parents promised at our baptisms that we'd grow up to become. *If you are* the beloved son or daughter of God then you won't ever forget who you are and you will always do all you can do to fully live out your precious identity. *If you are* the beloved daughter of son of God you'll live each and every day trusting in God's providence through thick and thin, knowing that the angels are sure to come rushing in—it's a God thing.

And you know what? I can think of no better way for a church called Christ Church to be church, than being generous in all things and all manner of things.

Praise be to God and Amen.