

February 18, 2018
1 Lent, Year B
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Never More?

There are a few non-negotiables when it comes to Lent. It is what the Prayer Book says it is: a time of self-examination and repentance. A time of prayer, fasting and self-denial – and a journey that we may not want to begin.

Many mark these days by intentionally doing something different. Whether it is going down the familiar “giving up or taking on” route or just paying more attention to God’s call on our life. Grabbing or guarding more time for quiet and centering. Pausing to remember why we care -- why we believe.

The wilderness is another Lenten non-negotiable. It always starts with Jesus spending 40 days in the wilderness with wild beasts being tempted by Satan. Wilderness is both location and metaphor in Scripture. It is the place where life gets scary and lonely – when priorities such as food, water and security become very real – and where temptation lurks. It is a time apart to consider how the presence of God can feel both far and very near.

Each one of us has our version of wilderness. When we’ve been cut off from support systems and loved ones. When we’ve experienced a forced or self-imposed exile. When tragedy strikes and we retreat or cocoon – or when grief or depression settles in for a long season.

Wilderness in Scripture is not meant to be permanent, rather a space to move through onto to something more.

Things can become clearer in the wilderness.

Every other week it seems we hear reports of hikers being rescued in New Hampshire’s White Mountains. They find themselves lost or wander too far off known pathways. We too get lost in the wilderness. And we can be found. We can be drawn into promise of the prophet Isaiah 58: v. 11 The Lord will guide you continually, and satisfy your needs in parched places, and make your bones strong; and you shall be like a watered garden, like a spring of water, whose waters never fail.

Along with Jesus and the wild beasts, I love this phrase in Mark: Jesus was with wild

beasts, “and the angels waited on him.”

Beyond a few mentions in Christmas pageants, we don’t think much about angels anymore. I rarely mention them in sermons. But angels fill the pages of Scripture as expressions of God’s messengers. They convey and communicate and show up. They watch over and protect. How many of us have felt, when we had passed through a moment of crisis or danger, that somewhere we must have a guardian angel looking over us? These are not just the promises to soothe a frightened child.

Our call to welcome the strangers comes with some hefty backing: 2 Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it. Hebrews 13:2

Novelist Marilynne Robinson captures the feeling that a parent has sending a child off to wherever parents send children off to, be it school or summer camp. A first date in the family car, college and beyond. “Any father...must finally give his child up to the wilderness and trust to the providence of God. It seems almost a cruelty for one generation to beget another when parents can secure so little for their children, so little safety, even in the best circumstances. Great faith is required to give the child up, trusting God to honor the parents’ love for him by assuring that there will indeed be angels in that wilderness.”

God assures us that there will be angels in the wilderness. God sent them for his son Jesus. God sends them to us. We prayed this morning in the Litany: Guard and protect all children who are in danger.

In the use of the Great Litany as we begin Lent, you see how we work into our prayers events in our larger world. We do so because our God is a God who acts in history. Who led people out of slavery, who returned them home after exile, and who sent a Son to be a Messiah to preach freedom and love and peace. And Christians have this stubborn belief that leaders can help shape our world for the good of us all – and thus closer to what God desires. We certainly know that bad and evil leaders can bring about death and destruction. So we offer our leaders our prayers. So we pray: Guide the leaders of the nations into the ways of peace and justice. Give your wisdom and strength to Donald, the President of the United States; and Chris, the Governor of this state, that in all things they may do your will, for your glory and the common good. Give to the Congress of the United States, the members of the President’s Cabinet, those who serve in our state legislature, and all others in authority the grace to walk always in the ways of truth. Bless the justices of the Supreme Court and all those who administer the law, that they may act with integrity and do justice for all your people.

“Never Again” are two powerful words.

They can be spoken between two people who have wounded each other by words or actions, and then spoken out of deep regret.

“Never again” has been associated with the Holocaust. The phrase reportedly first appeared on handmade signs put up by inmates at Buchenwald in April, 1945, shortly after the camp had been liberated by U.S. forces.

“Never again” are aspirational words. Words spoken out of ruin and rubble with an aspiring hope that what has just happened will never happen again in one’s lifetime.

“Never again” can be spoken between those whose trust has been broken and confidence has been shaken. Never again will I... take you for granted, say what I just said, hurt you in any way.

God spoke “never again” in Genesis 9. Then God said to Noah and to his sons with him, “As for me, I am establishing my covenant with you and your descendants after you. I establish my covenant with you, that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of a flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth.” God gives us a model of repentance – a change in behavior based on seeing the results of one’s actions.

A parishioner told me about the Parkland Florida shooting at the end the Ash Wednesday service. I might have heard something passing by the TV about a school shooting in the mid-afternoon, but in all honesty, it did not register.

A clergy friend of mine wrote on his blog this week (The Rev. David Romanik at <https://fatherdrom.wordpress.com/2018/02/15/repentance/>) that: “I hate that I have a ‘mass shooting routine.’ I hate that these events have become so commonplace that I know exactly how I’m going to respond. There is a grim and predictable routine: shock, sadness, outrage, blame, and apathy, all within the span of a few days, or even a few hours. Mass shootings have become so common that the only thing we feel like we can do is wait for the next one to occur.”

Even the offering of prayer has become like salt in the wounds in our current climate we are living through. Prayer without action is always suspect. Jesus had a way to sniff out hypocrisy. Matthew 6: “And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward.

“When you are praying, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do; for they think that they will be heard because of their many words.

We’re beyond a tipping point it seems. When “never again” is replaced with “please Lord let it not happen here.” We are people and a nation in need of deep repentance. The greatest prosperity the world has ever seen and we are awash with guns that have little to nothing to do with the hunting culture that is still strong and beloved in our state and by some of our families.

The debate has been so soiled and positions so hardened that many us feel that we are nearly powerless to affect change. We are getting farther away from “never again”.

And we still pray for the lives lost at another mass shooting.

Alyssa Alhadeff, age 14
 Scott Beigel, 35
 Martin Duque Anguiano, 14
 Nicholas Dworet, 17
 Aaron Feis, 37
 Jamie Guttenberg, 14
 Chris Hixon, 49
 Luke Hoyer, 15
 Cara Loughran, 14
 Gina Montalto, 14
 Joaquin Oliver, 17
 Alaina Petty, 14
 Meadow Pollack, 18
 Helena Ramsay, 17
 Alex Schachter, 14
 Carmen Schentrup, 16
 Peter Wang, 15

We pray that even if we as a society and our leader could not protect them in their schools, that God’s angels were indeed present.

May you and I use this Lenten wilderness time to link prayer with action. May we find ways to turn and change. Use what God has given us and make a difference in the lives a few people you touch and know. Reach out to a stranger – or an angel – and draw them in.

May this Lenten wilderness help us find again those pieces of our lives that seemed to have been lost. Dust off something you put down some time ago and make it new again.

As we prayed in the Litany: Give us true repentance; forgive us our sins of negligence and ignorance and our deliberate sins; and grant us the grace of your Holy Spirit to amend our lives according to your word.