

Lent 1C
February 21, 2010

St. Andrew's and St. Swithin's

Deuteronomy 26.1-11
Ps 91.1-2, 9-16
Romans 10.8b-13
Luke 4.1-13

You know, inspiration is a funny and slippery thing. Perhaps it is even fitting to be thinking about inspiration on a Sunday when the Spirit led Jesus into the wilderness. Inspire is a breathy word and the Spirit blows in and through us. Well, sometimes inspiration comes from unpredictable places. I was pretty sure I knew where this sermon was going earlier in the week and how I would lead into it today. But that will have to wait for another Sunday because Friday night the Port Angeles Playhouse provided the final inspiration. Doug suggested, and it seemed like a great idea, to go to opening night for *Damn Yankees*. Some of you will immediately smile and nod, but I had no idea what the play was about and hadn't read the lovely two page spread on it in the paper yet.

I encourage you to go see it; there's a matinee today and two more weekends to fit it in. It could be part of your Lenten discipline or at least very appropriate to the Thursday evening theme of art and faith. It would be fun to talk about *Damn Yankees* the night we talk about theatre. Because *Damn Yankees* is all about this gospel reading. It only takes about 10 minutes into the play to figure that out. It's a light-hearted musical comedy you may already know. And it's perfect for Lent.

The basic premise is that old Joe is crazy over baseball as a Washington Senators fan but the team can't beat the damn Yankees. He muses that he'd sell his soul for a chance to be the long ball hitter the Senators need. And poof, Mr. Applegate shows up and convinces him that he can be 22 and save the Senators and his dream will come true. (Don't miss the significance of the apple...) So Joe leaves his loving wife a vague note about returning and off he goes with the silver-tongued Mr. Applegate to fulfill his dream.

Mr. Applegate, and his steamy accomplice Lola, are just what you think the devil personified would be. No horns or pointed tail, but just about. We laugh and smile through the show and, of course, it turns out like you expect it might. Young Joe misses being old Joe, misses his wife, and despite all the diabolical efforts of the devil, Joe and true love win out.

But there is no more serious subject matter on earth. The temptation to reach for what we think will make us happy. Or thin. Or rich. Or popular. Or noticed. And to risk our spiritual and sometimes physical lives in the effort. Mr. Applegate, or CS Lewis' Screwtape, or the tempting voices in our heads are smooth and slick and tell us what we want to hear. Barbara Crafton writes that the devil knows his scripture and probably goes to church, too, never missing a Sunday.

When we read the gospel stories of Jesus in the wilderness being tempted by Satan or the adversary, or the devil, or however you wish to name it, there is a tendency to think it must have been easy for Jesus to resist. After all, he'd just been baptized and named the Son of God and quoted the right scripture back at the devil. But I don't think it was that easy. It couldn't have been if he was truly human. The gospel doesn't say it was a trial, something hard that Jesus had to endure. But a temptation; a testing. It couldn't have been a slam dunk for Jesus either. Satan offered him things he might really have wanted after 40 days. Food, power, authority.

40 days in the wilderness being sorely tested by the devil. Hard, awful, necessary. Barbara Brown Taylor says that

those of us who believe it have proof that it is humanly possible to remain loyal to God. So we are given a season of 40 days of our own, the church calls it Lent which originally derived from “spring” to spend in our corner of the wilderness. As Jesus was trying to figure out what it meant to be Jesus, in Lent we try to figure out how to move from the ashes of Lent to the fire of Easter and our own most authentic selves as children of God.

It’s a journey to the cross with Jesus. We’ll walk it together using our breathtaking new Stations of the Cross every Friday. But we must also walk it ourselves, into the depths of our own interiors, into the dark places where the smooth talking fancy dressing Mr. Applegate tells us that we can have anything we want if only we’ll listen to him.

You know the words. “Eat this. Drink this. Buy this. Inhale this. You deserve it. You earned it. Go ahead, it’s no big deal; it’ll be okay...” Taylor continues that 99% of us are probably addicted to something, even things which might be considered “good” like taking care of other people. Or volunteering for important causes. She gives the simplest definition of addiction as anything we use to fill the empty place inside of us that belongs to God alone. The hollowness we sometimes feel is not a sign of something gone wrong. It is the holy of holies inside of us, the uncluttered throne room of the Lord our God, she writes. Nothing on earth can fill it, but that does not stop us from trying. To enter the wilderness is to leave behind our artificial fillers.

But it is in leaving behind those things which keep God out, that we are better able to do what Jesus did in a process of elimination. It is discernment of our vocation as disciples. We probably won’t ever have the wilderness test that Jesus did. But we have our own. If we are children of God, what must we lay down to follow? Pride? Envy? Greed? The illusion of control? How can we spend these 40 precious days and remember what it is like to live by the grace of God alone and not by what we can supply for ourselves?

Nora Gallagher has a good point when she says that Jesus’ temptations once seemed too archaic for her modern mind, but they have come to represent things all too familiar. Satan’s temptations signify magic, rescue, fame and power, and they beckon us every day of our lives. On the other side of the fence is happiness, a new relationship will be better than the one I have, if I only had what she had, I would be fulfilled. These are fantasies and they drain the life out of us. She continues that to come to terms with illusion is one of the great tasks of our lives: what is fantasy and what is reality; what is desired and what is needed; what makes us dead and what gives us life; what are stones and what is bread.

The wilderness is going to take on its own geography in your life this Lent. And it may look like places we have already been: in the principal’s office for cheating on a test, church for your father’s memorial service, the empty mailbox which used to contain a paycheck, or the hospital’s emergency room. If we are brave enough to enter these 40 days of wilderness, we will not travel alone. The Spirit led Jesus into the wilderness but didn’t abandon him there. We might not look forward to the trip, but on the other hand we might welcome its potential to be the most real and life-changing place we could ever be. The Spirit that leads us into the desert will lead us out again; without our fantasies and illusions we will be more whole, more filled, more real than we have ever been. More ready to say no to Lola and Mr. Applegate, and to worship the Lord your God and serve no other.

Gail Wheatley+