

The date was January 18, 2010. It had been six days... His name was Roger, and for six long days he stood alone atop the pile of debris that he had once called “home,” digging with his bare hands through the remains of what had once been the center of his family life, looking for something – anything that he might be able to salvage. In an instant, it had all been reduced to rubble when the earth shook, and the ground split open, and his once-beautiful and beloved Haiti had been reduced to ruin. He couldn’t just leave her there, buried somewhere deep beneath the slabs of concrete. And so he dug, dug with his hands, calling out her name for hours on end, hoping against hope that some kind of response might come forth in return.

And then it happened. Leaning deep into a hole he had created in the rubble, he called out, “Jeannette, Jeannette.” And then he waited and listened. Suddenly, from somewhere below, there was a sound, a cough, and then a voice. Soon, Roger was accompanied by an urban rescue team from the Los Angeles Fire Department, which was in Haiti to aid in the search efforts, along with a film crew from CNN which happened to be reporting in the area. The hole was enlarged and a small remote-control camera was lowered into the darkness. Within minutes, on the monitor at the surface, there appeared a face, eyes blinking against the glare of the camera’s light. Now it was a race against the clock. After what seemed like an eternity, the rescuers were able to extricate Jeanette from the ruins – injured, but alive. And as she emerged from the tomb that had once been her home, she was singing, in Haitian Creole, her song of victory... her song of defiance... her song of faith, “Do not be afraid of death”, she sang. “Do not be afraid of death.”

Welcome to All Saints on this first Sunday in the Holy Season of Lent. You may perhaps notice that things look a little different around here than they have the past few Sundays. Instead of our Altar hangings and vestments being green, as they had been since early January,

we now have these beautiful purple hangings here on the pulpit and lectern, and I am wearing this vibrant purple stole. And since it is not covered up as it usually is, you can see that our altar really is a lovely table back here. And thanks to Dana Kent, we now have this stunning display of green succulent plants adorning our high altar for the next six weeks. Indeed, the times – and the seasons – have changed.

The Church has, almost since its earliest days, set aside a period of time to prepare for the Easter celebration which is the centerpiece of our common life and faith as Christians. The exact length of that period of preparation has floated around more than a bit over the past 2000 years, from as short a time as two or three days, to a period lasting up to eight weeks. We now speak of the great 40 days of Lent... although if you count the days from Ash Wednesday to Holy Saturday (the day before Easter, and so the last day of Lent), you'll see that there are actually 46 days instead of 40. And so, to compensate for that discrepancy, some strains of the Christian tradition have excluded Sundays from that count to get us back to that magic number 40, which is why (by the way) you'll notice that at the top of your bulletin on the first page, this day is listed as the First Sunday **IN** Lent, while during other liturgical seasons like Advent and Easter, the Sundays of those seasons are called the Sundays **OF** Advent or Easter... during this time, we find ourselves celebrating Sundays that are “in” the Season of Lent, but not “of” the Season of Lent. If you are a person who “gives something up for Lent” you then can be the judge of how Sundays fit into your own Lenten spiritual discipline.

Why don't some people count Sundays as part of the Lenten Season? That distinction is, to me, an important one. We gather, as has the Church since its inception, on Sundays as a reminder of Jesus' resurrection, and the discovery of an empty tomb early on a Sunday morning. Sundays are resurrection days, every Sunday is a celebration of the resurrection... even during Lent. And that is very good news to me, because celebrating Lent makes no sense whatsoever without the assurance that it is Easter which awaits us at the conclusion of the season.

But just as Lent makes no sense without the promise of Easter, it is just as true that Easter makes no sense without a real appreciation of the events which led up to it. There is, as the old saying tells us, no way to get to Easter without first passing through Good Friday to get there. There is no empty tomb in the garden without a cross on Calvary which precedes it. As Christians – and certainly as Episcopalians – we are “Easter people”, as we so joyfully like to tell the world. But for so many of us, that Easter spirit is sometimes shallow and meaningless – little more than cute bunnies and pastel eggs and new outfits to wear to church on Easter Sunday – because we can’t bear to deal with the harsh realities of life – and death – which are just as much a part of the Easter story. Following her near-death experience beneath the rubble of her home in Haiti, Jeannette could sing so joyfully, “Do not be afraid of death.” But I wonder... are we capable of singing that same song?

This season of Lent... this 40 day season of preparation... begins, on this first Sunday of the season, with the traditional story of another 40 day season of preparation... this, of Jesus and his time in the wilderness immediately prior to the beginning of his public ministry. Immediately following his baptism, with his hair still dripping wet, and his feet still caked with the mud of the Jordan River, Jesus has to find a way to make some sense out of this bizarre turn of events which led him to seek those cleansing waters of baptism, and find, as well, the voice of God in his life. The action in today’s gospel lesson comes at the end of that 40 day cycle of fasting when Jesus has his strange and mystical encounter with the devil.

Some people may hear this lesson of Jesus’ temptation in the wilderness, and imagine a real live devil – maybe even with a long red tail and a pitchfork – leading Jesus around on this wild goose chase from place to place to place. Others might hear this same story and understand Jesus to be in some kind of hunger-induced trance following his 40 days of fasting. Still others may say that he was wrestling with some kind of inner demon, some ego-driven

compulsion to let all of this “voice from heaven” stuff go straight to his head. Frankly, I don’t care which one you pick, because I don’t really think that’s the point of the story anyway.

For me, the real message I take away from this passage is that the same Spirit which came down from heaven and lighted upon Jesus at his baptism... that very same Spirit of God also led Jesus out into the wilderness experience which followed that baptism. Just as that voice from heaven spoke to Jesus, saying, “You are my beloved Son,” that same voice compelled Jesus to go into the wilderness to figure out what difference that revelation was supposed to make in his life. And so Jesus is subjected to a series of tests – of temptations, if you will – where the devil entices Jesus to take a short-cut, to take the easy way out from life’s predicaments.

First, the devil tempts Jesus by saying... “You’re hungry, aren’t you? Well, just turn this stone into bread and you’ll be fed in no time.”

And then the devil tries again... “Make God show a little proof of that divine power. Just throw yourself off of the temple here, and God will send angels to protect you. You know you’ll be alright. Just go ahead and jump.”

And then finally... “Look, look at all those kingdoms, which are yours for the asking. Just say the word... just worship me... and they’ll all be yours.”

In all of those encounters between Jesus and the devil, I think it is more than simply a temptation for Jesus to do the miraculous... after all, there are going to be plenty of opportunities down the road where he’s going to do just that. At a much more basic level, I think it was simply a challenge wherein Jesus had to decide whether he was going to be the person that God had called and created him to be... or whether he was going to try to be

something else. In the midst of that confrontation, I can imagine Jesus hearing the words of Moses ringing in his ears:

“I call heaven and earth to witness against you today that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life.”

And in making the decision to choose life... to choose the life that God had given him, Jesus had to confront, and stand at the doorway, and then turn away from the life that was not meant to be his. That is, quite literally, what the word “repent” means, for that is the English translation of the Greek word “strepho”, which means, “to turn around.” To embrace life... to embrace the life that God had given him, he had to look the alternative square on in the face and then to turn away, saying, “Do not be afraid of death. Do not be afraid of death.”

Are you living the life that God has called you to live? Are you being the person that God has created you to be? I think that those are two questions that each one of us has to ask and answer for ourselves. And it is just as true that they are two questions which we, as the people of All Saints, especially in this time of transition, have to ask and answer as well. Are we, as God’s holy people in this place, living the life that God has called us to live? Are we being the church – the community of the faithful – that God has created us to be?

There are plenty of other voices in the world around us vying for our attention... and our affection... and our affiliation. Many of those voices bombard us from a variety of external sources – television programs, advertisers, sports stars, and political figures, just to name a few. But, truth be told, more than a few of those voices originate deep within ourselves as well... for some of us, it is, perhaps, a desire for perfection... for others, a fear of failure... for still others, either an over-inflated sense of one’s own importance on the one hand, or a denial of one’s own inherent goodness and worth on the other. In any case, the impulse is the same... to be someone other than who you truly are; to deny the goodness, and the wholeness, and the holiness that is you, and to replace it with something else.

Whatever else you plan to do to mark this holy season of Lent, one thing that I invite you to do this year is to spend every day as though it's a Sunday... to spend every day celebrating Easter. For that new life which Jesus experienced on Easter morning is available to us as well... new life, as we live into the persons, and as we live into the people, God is inviting us to become. So, Happy Lent... and Happy Sunday... and let me be the first to say, Happy Easter.

Amen.