

## WHERE DOES YOUR SONG GO FROM HERE?

A Sermon for the First Sunday in Lent, Sunday, March 5, 2017

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I begin, as I often do, with music, found in Common Praise, #104

Joy shall come, even to the wilderness,  
and the parched land shall then know great gladness;  
as the rose, as the rose shall deserts blossom,  
deserts like a garden blossom.

For living springs shall give cool water,  
in the desert streams shall flow;  
for living springs shall give cool water,  
in the desert streams shall flow

Prompted by the Spirit, into the desert Jesus goes, an inhospitable place, and in terms of ministry efficiency and programme development, not an obvious choice. Some may suggest he has lost his way, something he heard many times in his earthly witness. Others suggest he is being punished, largely because we tend to think this of ourselves. Adversity strikes, or life simply goes sideways . . . and we ask ourselves “what did I do wrong?” Sometimes we do make mistakes for which there are consequences but for the most part such an assessment is groundless.

With thanks to DJ Clarke, I use the word “groundless” instinctively, because Jesus’ adventure into the desert is anything but groundless. He ventures into strange territory in order to show us *how grounded he really is*. He is indeed tested by God’s rival, *diabolos*, the devil, Satan, one known by many names, sometimes personified, and at other times named simply as an evil force. He is tested not after a long semester of academic preparation, but prior to the next step on his ministry journey and physical life.

Lent traditionally is formation time in the Christian Church, where candidates for baptism prepare not only for the glories of resurrection Sunday, but for their full initiation into the life of the church. In such preparation there are commitments to be considered, convictions well expressed in our baptismal vows:

Question Do you renounce Satan and all the spiritual forces of wickedness that rebel against God?

**Answer I renounce them.**

Question Do you renounce the evil powers of this world which corrupt and destroy the creatures of God?

**Answer I renounce them.**

Question Do you renounce all sinful desires that draw you from the love of God?

**Answer I renounce them.**

Such language sums up Jesus' own particular vision quest described in today's Gospel. Specifically, in renouncing the person of Satan, all evil powers of this world, and all sinful desires that draw us from the love of God, we find ourselves free to take next steps in a journey of faith. While some will howl at the allusion, I see in Matthew's text an ancient episode of reality spiritual TV, where we know the odds against survival in the wilderness, as the story-hero is pitted against powerful foes all limited by his own temptations and inclinations.

Like the visual voyeur who lives in our house or personality, we wonder silently how would we measure up? Could we survive the onslaught unleashed against Jesus? I don't know about you, but personally I love prestige, attention, and more than my share of fine and fatty food. At the same time however, I like the phrase from the Book of Common Prayer burial service which describes a *devout, religious and Holy life*. At the end

of my days I would like to be able to say that even if I didn't quite measure up to those ideals, that at least I tried and came close to that those amazing accomplishments.

So, where are we, right there and right now? Jesus' own vision quest sets the stage for our Lenten journey. His own success overcoming temptation and literally vanquishing his assailant is a Good News story. While we are not Jesus, we do in some measure attempt to imitate his actions. Surely in some measure we can do likewise. Thinking of Lent as a *Vision Quest* has a long and noble tradition within Anglican Christian spiritual practice. Moving into Lent there is a choice for us all to consider, well expressed by E. B. White (*Charlotte's Web*, with thanks to Al Leake for the quote): "I arise in the morning torn between a desire to improve the world and a desire to enjoy the world. This makes it hard to plan the day."

Some days it's hard to know what to do and with whom to do it! There is always a choice, either to engage all of life, or disengage, even run from it. While I have put Jazz aside since moving here, I am missing this improvisational world. Kathie and I will travel in a few weeks' time to Chicago where the North American Cathedral Deans will meet in a city rich in jazz history. Part of the agenda includes a jazz and blues tour. Wow! I may not come back!?! In preparation I am reading a biography of jazz pianist Herbie Hancock who with the second great Miles Davis Quintet recorded an amazing set of concerts at the famed (but sadly now defunct) *Plugged Nickel Nightclub* over two nights in 1965.

Hancock describes these performances as pushing the very boundaries of jazz and musical performance. Four members of the quintet decided not to tell Miles what they were going to do. At times they simply stopped playing. At other times they would throw in a different chord to see what he would do. Next, they goaded each other in the same way. Pushing the charts to extreme limits, and in public and with the tape running, they

produced amazing music (admittedly not to everyone's taste) music which still referenced the original tune and chord progressions but which took performer and audience to new and amazing places. It may stretch the truth a bit, but many will say that jazz entered new territory after these legendary performances. The Jesus movement entered new territory after Jesus' vision quest. That's why the angels came and threw a party. Earth and community changed forever after the *defeat of diabolos in the desert*.

So for us, right here, right now, *where does the song go?* I am going to carve out a few minutes of silence so you can consider this for yourself, maybe for the very first time. *Where does your song go from here?* Don't try to nail down times, places and persons. Simply make yourself available to God. Dare to be vulnerable. Put another way, what might Christian faith look like amidst the realities of daily life, empowered by the One who is "Emmanuel, God with us."

Let's enjoy some quiet together, and see where the song goes from here .

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