

Journeying through Lent

Luke 4:1-13

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May my words be a lamp to our feet and a light to our path.

Nine weeks ago we celebrated the feast of the Epiphany:

- the story of the three kings from the East:
- their visit to Mary, Joseph, and the baby,
- and their confrontation with Herod, who desired the death of this child who threatened his kingdom

Nine weeks ago we were marveling that it hadn't snowed, that this might be a "green" winter. Thanks to my husband, who keeps track of the weather, I can tell you that the first measurable snow arrived on January 2. The day after Epiphany the "ice snow" shut down the whole area, even trash and recycling pickups and mail delivery. Two weeks later, another five inches fell, again causing numerous closures.

Everyone I know is in despair over the harshness of this winter. But there is hope. Beneath the ice and snow the plants are storing up energy to push into view once the snow melts and the sun warms the earth every day, as I putter in the kitchen or work at my desk, birds and squirrels arrive to lift my spirits as they nibble at our feeders. Most mornings I smile to see a rabbit's footprints on our sidewalk, another reminder that the earth is alive and humming, despite appearances.

And yet, we grow impatient with circumstances out of our control. I can imagine what the people of first-century Palestine must have felt as they waited for the coming of the king who would set them free from their enemies. A king who would ensure they could worship without fear. That king, like the bulbs buried beneath the snow in my garden, was

hidden away in the tiny village of Nazareth, growing in wisdom and strength. The Gospel readings for the long season of Epiphany—nine weeks in all—tell the story of the immersion of Jesus in God’s will for him, and for the people of Israel. We hear from Luke of Jesus’ baptism in the Jordan, where the heavens open and God proclaims that Jesus is his son, the “beloved,” with whom he is “well-pleased.” We see Jesus learning that the father in heaven has called him to lead the people of Israel.

He first demonstrates this understanding at the wedding in Cana, where he changes water into wine, rescuing the host from embarrassment. He shocks the congregation at his home synagogue in Nazareth, where he reads from the prophet Isaiah, proclaiming that “the Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.” After this first sermon, this opening up of Isaiah, Jesus preached in synagogues throughout his homeland. . . sometimes to awestruck listeners. . . sometimes to those who muttered that Joseph’s son could not be a prophet. And then, at the Lake of Genessaret, he overwhelmed Simon, James, and John with enough fish to swamp their boat, an act that caused them to leave their work and follow him.

Through these actions, Jesus came to realize his calling, and many men and women began to follow him as he preached and performed miracles. If Peter, James, and John had any doubts about this prophetic man, they were reassured by his Transfiguration on the mountain, where God proclaims “this is my Son, my chosen, listen to him. And if Jesus had any doubts, his wrestling with the powers of evil in the wilderness would have convinced him to come down from the mountain and move in the direction of his death.

Our lectionary—the lessons chosen for worship—does not include all the stories of Jesus’ travels through the roads of Palestine. Most of those show up during Common Time, the weeks of the “green season” in the

Church. The readings for the weeks of Epiphany point to the growth of Jesus in wisdom and in strength, a discernment more rigorous than the one Sister Diane and I experienced as we moved toward ordination. But I think it is a journey that is important for all of us as we enter Lent.

When I was a child, the Dominican sisters at St. Patrick's Grade School encouraged us to sacrifice something during Lent. My parents, like other Roman Catholic adults, fasted between meals during Lent, and all of my family went without meat during those 40 days. I also gave up candy bars and coke (ten cents!), which I often bought at the corner store on my way home from school. And I gave what I had saved from my allowance (25 cents!) to the ministry of the Briens, twin brothers who had grown up in my parish, and who served the missions in Taiwan.

Giving up candy and Coke was relatively easy compared to the sacrifice of the Briens, especially, I think, for their parents, who must have been both proud and sorrowful at the vocations that took them so far from their family. They spoke to the congregation once when they visited home, but I have only the vaguest memory of two good-looking young priests. Stronger in my memory is our weekly immersion in the Stations of the Cross, held every Friday afternoon of Lent before we headed home for the weekend. Our pastor, his assistant, and two altar boys processed around the church with a cross, torches, and incense, stopping at each step of the way to Calvary. At each station we chanted the "Stabat Mater," an ancient prayer whose words resonate even now:

(Sing) At the cross her station keeping,
stood the mournful mother weeping,
close to Jesus to the last.

One year, inspired by posters produced by the Maryknoll Missions, I decided to write for Lent a Stations of the Cross that would connect the traditional images and commentary with concerns of our world today. We do a new booklet each year, updating the prayers to include current events (the crisis at the US/Mexico border, e.g.). You might try your

hand at this, or at some other devotion that opens your heart to the suffering of our world. Or you might consider coming to Stations of the Cross on Good Friday afternoon. Or attending “Getting To Know Our Neighbor,” a film series which the Center for Christian Spirituality is sponsoring during Lent. It begins later this afternoon with a viewing and discussion of Amy Tan’s “Good Luck Club.” I read the novel and watched the film when they first came out: they are moving and thought-provoking. Or you might pick up “Acts Forty,” the calendar that challenges us to do acts of kindness each day of the season. Sr. Diane has copies available in the narthex.

These suggestions are all ways to walk through Lent, not with a mournful demeanor, but with a thoughtful heart.

I invite you, therefore, in whatever way you choose, to the observance of a holy Lent.