

Stephen R. Shaver  
Episcopal Church of the Incarnation, Santa Rosa, CA  
February 21, 2021  
1 Lent, Year B, Revised Common Lectionary  
Genesis 9:8-17  
Psalm 25:1-9  
1 Peter 3:18-22  
Mark 1:9-15

+++

*The desert is a dangerous place.*

*It is hot, scorching hot, in the daytime—and bitter cold at night.*

*The wind blows the stinging sand everywhere. People have to wear many layers of clothes to protect them from the sand, and from the sun.*

*The wind is always changing the shape of the sand, so you can easily lose your way.*

*There is no water in the desert, so there is nothing to drink. Without water, you could get very thirsty, or you could even die—so you have to carry plenty of water with you.*

*The desert is a very dangerous place. No one goes into the desert unless they have to.*

If we were in a Godly Play classroom, that might be how we would begin today's story. Godly Play is a wonderful way of sharing scripture stories with children—some of you may have experienced it before here at Incarnation, and surely the days aren't too long ahead when we will be able to do it again. One of the most popular materials in any Godly Play classroom is the desert box: a wooden tray,

often on wheels, about two feet square, filled with sand. Sometimes children call it the sandbox, because they're used to sandboxes at school and the playground. But we explain to children in Godly Play that this is not a sandbox like those other ones: this is a very special box, the desert box. The reason for the desert box is that so many of the important stories of the People of God have happened in the desert that we just have to have a piece of it in our classroom. Many, many Godly Play stories are told using the desert box, and they always begin in the same way: *the desert is a dangerous place*.

Abraham was called by God to cross the desert to find a new place to live, the Promised Land.

Moses and the children of Israel had to cross the Red Sea and wander through the desert for 40 years to learn how to become the People of God.

Those People of God went across the desert in chains of exile to Babylon, and returned across it again when God ended the exile and set them free.

And today Jesus goes out into the desert on this First Sunday of Lent. Just as the people of Israel went straight from the Red Sea into the desert of Sinai, Jesus goes straight up from the Jordan, still dripping with the waters of his baptism, to spend 40 days being tempted and tested, learning just what it will mean for him to be God's beloved Son in whom God is well pleased.

*The desert is a dangerous place. No one goes into the desert unless they have to.* It seems as if Jesus simply has to go out into the desert. Mark doesn't tell us why, but does tell us that it happens "immediately" and that it's the Holy Spirit that "drives him out" into the wilderness. That same Spirit that has just descended on him like a dove in this beautiful scene of baptism is now almost violently forcing Jesus to embark on this dangerous journey no sooner than he's come up out of the water. That should tell us something about just what it means to be baptized: baptism is no joke.

Baptism drives us to go do hard things.

Now today is the First Sunday of Lent: and the entire season of Lent is about baptism. It's a season of penitence, surely; of preparation for Easter, even more so; but in its beginnings and its deepest meaning, Lent is a season of preparation for baptism, for new Christians who were to be baptized at the Great Vigil of Easter. As the candidates prepared for baptism through prayer, fasting, and almsgiving, the rest of the church joined with them in those spiritual practices, and found their own baptismal identity strengthened and renewed. We are here today as the community of the baptized at the Church of the Incarnation, dispersed from being able to gather together physically, but one community nonetheless. And just as with Jesus, the Holy Spirit is driving us from our own baptism to follow Jesus out into the desert.

Part of that journey through the desert is the Lenten journey we undertake this year just as we do every year. These forty days are a time to pray more intentionally; to eat and drink more simply; and to share what we have more abundantly with the poor. Those traditional spiritual practices of prayer, fasting, and almsgiving are the pillars of Lenten practice: they are ways to prepare our hearts and minds and bodies for the great mystery of Holy Week and the great joy of Easter.

Part of that journey is special this year: the ongoing journey through a pandemic, one where we see glimmers of hope for an ending just over the horizon and yet that ending is not yet. Like the first shoots poking up through the ground. Like the hints of Easter beckoning to us from the beginning of Lent.

And even when we are gathered in person once more there will still be desert journeys to make. Deep discernment as a congregation about what our mission looks like after the greatest disruption to our common life we've ever had. What goes back to normal, to what extent there even is a normal, and what will be new. What new ways to love God and serve our neighbors we will discover in this world that is so different from the one we knew just a year ago. Over the next few months and years there will surely be plenty of times we feel we're wandering through the

desert. And we are: because baptism calls us to do hard things, and it is the Spirit of God that has driven us here.

*The desert is a dangerous place. It can be hard to find water, and you can get very thirsty, or you could even die—so you have to bring plenty of water with you.*

Friends, as we embark on the journey ahead we need to carry our own waters with us. Like Jesus, we need to go into the desert fortified and dripping with the waters of our baptism. Remember that Jesus goes out on his desert journey only after he has heard God's voice telling him once and for all who he is as God's beloved. So we too must carry the assurance that God's love and God's deep pleasure in us are with us wherever we go.

We'll need to carry the stories of who we have been as a community. Carry the memories of founders and leaders and members past and present. We'll need to carry the customs and traditions of this parish along: celebrations and suppers and laughter. Not to let old practices hold us prisoner, not to let them harden into chains to keep us from having new adventures, but to carry them along as precious nourishment to draw upon. And we'll need to carry a willingness to open ourselves to our neighbors, to discover Christ's presence in new people and new traditions and new stories that are just waiting to be written into the story of the baptized in this place.

Most of all, we will carry with us the truth that can sustain us through any desert, and even through death itself: the truth that in Jesus, we are God's beloved, in whom God is well pleased.