

In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him.

Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news." Mark 1: 9-15

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The Journey Inward: Worth a Try?

It's Lent, the season for a Journey Inward. Inward to quiet and reflection. A time to understand more deeply God, ourselves, and others.

To find that within each of us is all that we need. We can be filled with the Holy Spirit, Love Unending, the Transcendent. But to discover this, to really trust this, usually takes a journey.

The "Inward" Journey during Lent. What does that mean *for you*?

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All year we've used the Journey metaphor to capture something of our life here at King's Chapel. It conveys the notion we feel that our spiritual lives are not "won/one and done," some pinnacle we reach once, a single point in time when we've arrived.

We know that we journey, growing and changing throughout our lives, and that we treasure companions on the journey. At King's Chapel we say,

"Whoever you are, and wherever you are on life's journey, you are welcome here. Believer or doubter, skeptic or seeker, we're all on the journey together."

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So this fall, we explored what it means to be journeying *together* – as the Hebrew people did throughout the Old Testament, a caravan journeying from one place to another, led by God. Abraham and Sarah, leaving their familiar home, journeying across the desert to "the promised land." Moses, leading the Exodus, the Hebrew people journeying again across a desert, finding they were given by God all they

needed: manna when they were hungry, water from the rock when they thirsted, and in the end, the way back home to the promised land.

Journey stories – the metaphors of the Bible – have a familiar ring. As individuals we cross barren places in our own lives, hoping to get somewhere better. As a congregation, we move forward, through hard times, trusting that God journeys alongside us. Today in this Lent season, we began a new tradition: “Living Epistles,” when our members share from their own spiritual journeys. We are all on this journey of life, together.

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Recently, the journeys that have received most of our attention have been our frustrating attempts to simply “journey” across Boston. The T shuts down, commuter trains are delayed, cars sit bumper to bumper, hemmed in by towering walls of snow, and when all we want to do is get home at the end of a long, cold day, there are endless lines for the buses and gridlock at every downtown intersection.

These “journeys” haven’t felt like progress towards a promised land; and they certainly haven’t evoked the image of an inward journey toward some enlightenment. The words that have sprung to mind about our recent commutes are, well...maybe it’s best to keep those particular journey metaphors to ourselves!

But despite these recent negative associations we’ve had with the “journey metaphor,” our blizzards may actually have primed us for a quiet journey inward this Lent. We’re so worn to exhaustion, that a pause may sound especially inviting this year. And the frustrations of this winter may make us yearn ever more for a calm center, a conviction grounded in our spiritual lives that everything really will be all right.

We want assurance. That, as was true for Jesus in his wilderness experience, when we are stuck in our deserts of snow, “tempted” to scream; when the “wild animals” of resentment and fury prowl close by us, like Jesus we will also have angels minister to us: neighbors who help us shovel, or strangers who push us out of snow drifts. This winter, we seek assurance that in fact, in this Lenten, blizzard we might be the angels for others.

Do you yearn for some period of quiet now, in these forty days before Lent? An inward journey?

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Children show us how we humans always need both kinds of journeys in our lives: the times of growth and change, and the times of slower reflection and integration, taking deep within us what we’re learning, internalizing the Spirit, Love, Light.

As a young mother, it was a helpful to learn from the Gessell Institute at Yale, which postulated that stages of human development can be like a wide spiral upwards – a rapid phase of new skills developed then a plateau, where the child's new discoveries and skills are integrated and taken deeply within. Then another rapid spiral up to the next level, and a next plateau.

Why wouldn't it be the same in our spiritual lives, too?

Think of "the toddler," a stage aptly named: the first steps a child takes are "toddles" aren't they? Lurching little movements, as she concentrates intently on throwing one foot in front of the other, keeping her balance, falling down and then pushing herself up again, determined to cross the living room to the coffee table where some adult waits, sitting on the couch.

For the little one, much is being rapidly learned, through experiments – trying this, trying that, and through practice, over and over and over, falling down and walking a few more steps.

Then comes the plateau time, when our little girl integrates *within*, her growing understanding: which floor surfaces will be slippery, how to bend her knees, the secrets of balance. Through practice, the hard wiring happens in her brain, the muscle memory grows, until she doesn't have to be completely consumed with the effort of walking. To walk across a room becomes a common, ordinary skill, each step no longer applauded by the grownups or photographed.

Of course this is overly simplified, but it does capture some truth, doesn't it: the spirals that happen at each age.

Young adults, in the years after schooling – the first lurches forward we all take of renting apartments and paying monthly bills, the rapidly accelerating early loves, the first jobs– all things that sometimes work and sometimes don't, just like making a beeline for the coffee table and finding ourselves tripped up, down on the floor, trying to muster the energy to push back up and get going again.

It happens after a divorce or death, too, our lurching steps as we try to find equilibrium on our own again, instead of leaning on another or having them lean on us. It happens with illness or job loss or retirement, when the plateau time stretches far too long, and we wish we could get going again, move on to the next phase, but can't yet.

It happens when you've been betrayed, or someone questions your motives. When you or a loved one grapple with mental illness or suicide. A common response is to "man up," shoulder on, work even harder to prove your worth or repress the pain. But over time, we find we can't keep moving forward unless we've first paused – to reflect, to sift and sort, to integrate internally our new reality.

Typically, if we don't slow down volitionally, our body will make us do it – a breakdown or heart attack or sadness so pervasive we can't get out of bed.

Lent is a gift, I think. A time for plateaus. For resting and wondering and reconsidering. And for practicing the new steps we're learning, so they become more engrained, like muscle memory, part of who we are in a profound way.

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If this is part of our journey physically and emotionally, why wouldn't it be the same for our relationship with the Holy? Haven't there been times when something new seems to happen in your spiritual life, there are new journeys forward, spurts upward in our understanding, experiences demanding and exhilarating. We're lurching forward, with some excitement; we experience a lightness or warmth or even certainty that we are not alone, that there is a Transcendent who will care and nurture us somehow. But then the ground under us shifts, the rug feels pulled out from under us, and we're sprawling, like a toddler again. It takes energy to get back up and going.

We need time to pause again, to go inward, to understand more about ourselves and our place in the Universe. What is Truth? In what can we trust?

Might this Lent be the gift of time you've needed, to stop and reflect, to integrate what you've experienced, to deepen your relationship with the Holy?

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That's what happened to Jesus. When our lesson from Mark opens, Jesus is about to start his teaching and preaching. He's just pushed into a huge new stage of his life – leaving behind the familiar hometown, going out to the far border of the country, to the Jordan River, probably ready to become a disciple of John the Baptist. It's a huge spiral up, you might say, a rush of dedicating his life to a whole new journey and direction, but after this burst of change, Jesus needs plateau time, and the spirit drives him into the wilderness for forty days – a very long time. Only after his time in the wilderness, the desert plateau, can Jesus take the next spiral up, beginning his own work, apart from John.

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Tradition – which we so value here at King's Chapel – gives us ways to follow in the spirit, and seek the truth. Here it is: Set aside time of quiet, and stick to it.

Last Lent, one couple chose to come to here every Wednesday for six weeks – to drive in regardless of the weather or competing invitations. They read together a daily devotional book. They built in a time of reflection, a plateau.

This year, on Wednesday, a woman I've never seen here before came to our 6 PM service, and told me on the way out, "I'll be back. I haven't been to church for a long time – things have been hectic – but I can at least come each week for six weeks during Lent."

Another person has chosen to come faithfully every Wednesday for a whole year, following a Jewish tradition: after the heart-breaking death of a loved one, the mourner worships every week for a year, in honor of the dead. A forced time, a needed time, that the ancient Hebrew tradition knows is necessary to heal: week after week, in the presence of community, hearing the old words of scripture, singing the old, old hymns, praying the precious prayers. A ritual, like sutures, that helps hold us together, allowing wounds to slowly heal, from the inside out.

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What could Lent look like for you this year? If you saw it not as an onerous obligation, but as a gift – the opportunity to quietly prepare for whatever lies ahead for you next?

Sometimes we say that in Lent we'll give up sugar or Starbucks, Facebook or chocolate – I've done that, too. But do you ever wonder how those practices really fit with what Jesus did out in the wilderness for forty days?

We could say it's our way to battle temptation, as Jesus did. We do grow strong in the repeated denial of wine or sweet things, our obsession with how many "likes" we gotten for our posts. And those are good things – growing stronger, setting aside obsessions.

But as we free ourselves *from* these little temptations, what do we free ourselves *for*? Remember that amazing collect of the day from our Prayerbook, printed at the top of our order of service:

Almighty God, by whose power Jesus of Nazareth did fast in the wilderness for forty days and nights; grant us power to employ such discipline as may free us *from* ourselves and *for* thy service, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

What will we do with this Lent that might more deeply free us from ourselves and for God's service?

Jesus not only wrestled with temptations in the wilderness. He also was cared for by the angels. Fierce desert animals were around him, but he became convinced, he would be all right. Jesus emerged from his wilderness time convinced to the core of his being that he never needed to be afraid, whatever lay ahead, because he *was* truly God's beloved child. So are you.

Imagine, what would happen this Lent if we were courageous enough to begin with a few days, in this first week of Lent, honestly assessing where we are on our own particular journeys, naming what it is that we are wrestling with, what's really hard for us, right now.

Realizing, for example, that we wrestle not just with a hunger for chocolate, so we'll give that up. But realizing that what we really hunger for is affirmation – for people to notice us, listen to us, thank us. Then our Lenten quiet time may be this daily prayer: Spirit of Truth and Love, help me *know* that I am worthy of notice, that you hear me, that you honor me for doing my best.

What if you prayed or meditated or journaled each day, for forty minutes – or fifteen - on this question: how is God already giving me the affirmation for which I hunger, the manna I need in my wilderness?

Writer Kate Braestrup was a young mother, perhaps she says, grappling with post partum depression, when she ran into a friend, a seasoned hospital chaplain, in the bookstore. He took one look at her face, and wrote out a prescription, line by line on a piece of paper, and said: "Take this, 3x a day, more if needed." It was the 23rd Psalm, and daily she did read it –not 3 times, but ten.

This Lent we might think we're going to abstain from comfort food. But what if we dig deeper, seeing that what we really crave is the comfort of "security," a trust that the future will be all right. Then Lent spent considering the 23rd Psalm, line by line, day by day, slowly savoring the comfort of its lasting nourishment, could be what will heal us.

The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want [anything more].
I have all that I need.
Yea, when I walk through
the valley of the Shadow of Death,
even *there* I will fear no evil, for Thou art with me.... "

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Friends, I see Lent as a gift, a time to notice both what tempts us and the angels who minister to us, all around.

I don't know what is most hard for you, right now. What weighs you down. What stands between you and Love, or Courage, or Strength – your promised land. But of this I am convinced: God journeys with you across any wilderness, determined to give you the food you need, the refreshing water for which you thirst, and a safe path home.

What do you think? Is it worth trying out for 40 days?