

**FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
305 EAST MAIN STREET
DURHAM, NC 27701
PHONE: (919) 682-5511**



“Test”

A sermon by Sam R. Miglarese

First Sunday in Lent (Year C)

February 14, 2016

Deuteronomy 26:1–11; Psalm 91:1–2, 9–16; Luke 4:1–13

‘A cold coming we had of it,
Just the worst time of the year
For a journey, and such a journey:
The ways deep and the weather sharp,
The very dead of winter.’ (“Journey of the Magi” by T.S. Eliot)

Those are the beginning words of T.S. Eliot’s famous poem, “Journey of the Magi,” which I believe is an apt image for the time of the church year that we have already begun to engage: the holy season of Lent. We are a people on a journey. We are a pilgrim people. We are a pilgrim church, walking toward our God, a God who promises to walk always with us.

We move through life as if it were a journey. We live in one place and we move to another. We take one job and we start another. Children are born, they grow, and they set off on their own journeys. No matter what stage of life we’re in, no matter what age we are, all of life’s journeys contain in and of themselves profound joys and deep sorrows. Love—a love that is commemorated today on Valentine’s Day—as well as the broken promises of love that causes so much pain. Life’s journeys are full of frustrations, anxieties, and also a deep and profound peace.

We are a people on a journey, and in this holy season of Lent, God calls us to walk with Jesus into the wilderness, to experience our solidarity with He who walked from his baptism in the Jordan River, identifying with all of our simple humanity, into the wilderness to face his demons. Even though Lent is so often portrayed as if it were a grim period of time where we are to be fasting and doing penance and giving things up for the glory of God—yes, our traditional disciplines need to be embedded in our journey throughout this holy season—for me, it is not a period of grimness. It is a period of hopefulness that leads to Easter.

We model this journey in Lent with the preaching of Jesus. The very first words from the lips of Jesus in Mark's Gospel are proclaiming the coming kingdom and the conditions to enter into it. "Repent, turn away from sin, and believe in the good news!" Believe in the promised coming of the kingdom's values. That formula was one of the formulas we used on Ash Wednesday when we identified together with the fragility of our humanity, in the inevitability of death, but at the same time, we are called upon to turn away from sin and to believe in the good news, a good news that we know is a conviction we proclaim that God will keep will sustain.

In the first reading from Deuteronomy, there is a classic ancient confession of faith. As the priests put forward at the altar the first fruits of the labors of God's people, they were then told to make a response before the Lord. In that response, there was a recalling of the people of Israel of all their time of redemption, in particular, the movement from Exodus to the Promised Land, from slavery to freedom. It was such joy, they proclaimed that "the Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with a terrifying display of power... and he brought us into this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey (Deuteronomy 26:8-9).

In parallel to that, you heard the Gospel account of Jesus in the desert, in the

wilderness. He was full of the spirit when he left the Jordan after his baptism that he moved almost immediately into the wilderness to wrestle with demons, to test his new identity. He was led by the spirit, and he was full of the spirit. There, he was constantly tempted to compromise his new sense of self, his new sense of purpose. The devil kept saying, “If you are the Son of God, and you’re hungry, then transform these stones to bread.” “If you are the Son of God, I will give you glory and authority over all the kingdoms. Just pay obeisance to me and all is yours.” And the devil takes him to the top of Jerusalem’s temple and says, “Throw yourself down and don’t worry about. Angels of mercy will catch you.” He quotes Scriptures: “And not a stone will dash your feet.” With each and every response to the devil’s pleas for his compromising his identity and not fulfilling his mission entrusted to him by his father, Jesus responds with the Word of God: “No! One does not live by bread alone.” “No! Worship the Lord your God with all your might and power. Serve only God.” “No! No one puts the Lord your God to the test.” It is the Word of God that was his weapon against the evil one.

We are called during Lent to follow this yearly opportunity to engage our demons, to turn away from sin, and to believe the good news. It is not a period of grimness. It is a period of hopefulness that leads ultimately to Easter.

I must say that the arrival of a new leader that we will vote on shortly to accompany us on our journey is a reminder that when we go into the desert, God always accompanies us with angels and miracles, with burning bushes, manna from heaven, and with the courage to cross the river into the promised land. What are the miracles that will accompany us and our new pastor on the journeys ahead?

I took for a possibility of those miracles in the values that we enunciated through a long “core values” process back in 2010. I would say that some of the miracles of grace that will emerge will be these:

- That we will be more faithful to lively worship and prayer, more attentive, more present, more engaged;
- That we will be more committed to greater diversity and inclusion in our congregation as we reach out with a sense of purpose to bring people back who have left or are waiting during this *interregnum*;
- To explore, hopefully as a real miracle, our own faith as a community of disciples;
- That we will continue to care for one another in a way that God has cared for us;
- That we will be strong advocates for social justice, and that we will respond to the cries of the poor in our community;
- That we will be faithful stewards as those who have been stewards in the past, stewards of the gifts that God has provided us in his church.

As the Lord Jesus was full of the spirit when he went into the desert, so too must we enter full of that same spirit prepared to withstand any temptations and to prepare to walk under new leadership in the coming days. This is our challenge, we being led by the spirit, to make Lent a decisive time, not only in our individual lives, but in the life of our church.