

“Healing of the Good Earth”
Lent 1, February 18, 2018
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Malcolm Muggeridge English journalist and author once pointed to two symbols from medieval cathedrals as appropriate and healthy symbols for the life of faith: the steeple and the gargoyle -*the steeple symbolizing the heart reaching for infinite God in the heavens and the laughing gargoyle reminding us of our earthbound limits and our own mortality.*

On ASH WEDNESDAY – the beginning of Lent – folks had the opportunity to have ashes imposed upon their forehead in the shape of a cross with the accompanying words: “*You are made of ashes and to ashes you will return.*” That “*gargoyle with its laughing face*” comes to my mind as we contemplate our own earthbound mortality- not only in the Lenten journey through THE WILDERNESS, but through a life that that gives us more than enough DOUBT AND DESPAIR.

Certainly this week we have been reminded of the fragility of life and our own mortality and that of those we love and we struggle with what to do and how to deal with it.

We could refer to the doubts and despairs of life – those things we struggle with - as “beasts.” Our Gospel lesson shows us that at one point Jesus “*was with the wild beasts*” in the wilderness. This was a time of great challenge for him and the choice of word “*beast*” serves as a symbol of the strength of the temptations that confronted him. The Greek word used for “beasts” refers to animals with a brutal nature – not Isaiah’s image of lambs lying down with lions. Being tempted by Satan was as demanding as wild animals threatening to devour him.

As Christians and people of faith we anticipate and expect being able to receive God’s healing and strength in the midst of “beastly” turmoil. We are taught that having a relationship with God will help. I would emphasize that being in relationship with God *is* an important component of any kind of healing.

Renowned scientist, botanist and inventor George Washington Carver always wore a flower in his lapel because it reminded him of “Mr. Creator,” as he called God. That’s a visible sign of working at relationship.

As we consider a *healing of the earth and all that is in it* – an earth that Mr. [or Ms.] God intended to be “good” – a creation of people who love and support each other and all of the creation we also look back at look at our text from Genesis which suggests that the Lenten journey is not just a human one, but that all of creation.

The Old Testament reading concludes the long story of the great flood when all living creatures apart from those saved by Noah were destroyed. It is a story telling how God created the world and a community of men and women with a destiny to care for the earth and experience divine intimacy.

As you know, sadly enough, they turned away from God, and established a rhythm of human sin and self-destructiveness, which, in turn, was repeatedly answered by renewed blessings [or healings] from God.

But, as the story goes, out of the waters of destruction from the flood a new beginning emerged when God made a covenant with *"you and your descendants after you, with every living creature that was with you: all the birds, and the various tame and wild animals that were with you in the ark...that never again shall all bodily creatures be destroyed by the waters of a flood."*

This was a universal promise to all living creatures BEFORE their division by race, religion and language and species – an indication that God still perceived creation as a holistic unit of life. Remember that floodwaters of God's wrath were poured out on both human and non-human creation alike.

And that rainbow symbol was given to recognize the unique relationship that exists between God and **all** of creation.

We know, especially on this Sunday that ALL of creation needs healing. The beasts of doubt and despair are upon all of the earth. What happened in Florida this week is visible evidence – as if we need more evidence.

Just as Jesus faced the hard realities of the wilderness we confront the hard realities of our time. Jesus emerged among the people to begin his ministry of proclaiming the Good News, living out and bringing to human kind the salvation of God. The wilderness testing prepared him for the test that would eventually ensure his obedience to God, even unto death.

Proof that Jesus defeated those "beasts" – totally, completely and decisively – is found in the way he conducted himself after he left the place of temptation. He moved out among God's people, loving them as God loves, teaching them about God, and finally proving that God loves us without condition. Do we do the same?

In responding to God's gracious love, we find ourselves in the Lenten season "assaulted by many temptations" facing the same tests that Jesus confronted in his wilderness. We too, struggle against the wild beasts of our times and our lives.

Just as Jesus was not alone we are not alone. We can learn from Jesus. In the wilderness, he encountered all the evil that there is – because he found it

in himself, in his own humanity. For in every human being – each and every one of us - lies the best of God and the worst of evil.

In the wilderness, the aim of the tempter was to move Jesus from faith in God to doubt. The forces that work against God also press us toward selfishness and away from love. Jesus resisted temptation by keeping himself connected to God. [That's why George Washington Carver wore the flower each day – to remind himself of Mr. or Ms. Creator – a loving healing God.]

And that is exactly how we can resist the beasts of our lives, how we can overcome the evil that lurks within us and the sin that is a part of us, all that lingers in the midst of our humanity.

We resist, as Jesus did, by staying connected to God through the power of the scriptures and prayer and the sacraments, and through regular self-examination and confession, through repenting of our sin, accepting God's forgiveness and leading renewed lives. That's a lot. But, by these means we defeat evil and overcome temptation. As we live in the midst of so much distress in our world we must be centered on the love of God. *"Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you ¹⁶yet do it with gentleness and reverence [I Peter 3: 15b-16a].*

And we don't do it alone. As the angels waited on Jesus in his wilderness experience, we are sustained by the Holy Spirit of God and through the aid of those disciples in our midst, our brothers and sisters in Christ, who minister to us and help us face down the beasts of our lives as they face down theirs.

During this Lenten season the "laughing gargoyles" continue to remind us of our mortality; and the beasts of doubt and despair will still face us. They enter our lives when hard decisions need to be made. We encounter them most strongly in those areas where we are weakest, in our desire to serve ourselves first.

But the power of God's love can help us resist the temptations and defeat the beasts that dwell both in and among us. We pray for the healing of the good earth that God intended recognizing that the task is too great for us to assume without God's power and presence. And so we ask God to strengthen in us the merits of patience, persistence, and selflessness, and to help us set aside self-centeredness and greediness.

Prayer: May God build up in us the strength to confront the "beasts" of the systems of evil in God's intended good earth and to replace them with systems that value the well being of all God's creation.

AMEN