

LENT 1
1 MARCH 20.20
GOOD SHEPHERD, NASHUA, NH

At once the Spirit forced Jesus out into the desert... (Mk 1.12)

I wonder what *desert* will mean to us this Lent. Where will God drive us, even *force* us to go? Who are the wild animals that harm our well-being? And who will take care of us along the way? *Desert* is the theme I have in mind for this Lent.

Mark, as opposed to Matthew, uses a harsh word to describe the Spirit's action. *Drive out. Throw out. Force out.* The Spirit has to use coercion when she pushes Jesus into his desert experience. *At once the Spirit forced Jesus out into the desert.* Other evangelists, like Matthew (our guide this year), chose the safer word, *led*. It misses the point. God forces. God throws. God drives Jesus out into the desert, at once, right away, immediately. There's no time to pack. No time for preparation. No room to equivocate, object or consult. It wasn't even his idea. *At once the Spirit forced Jesus out into the desert.* This experience is shared with wild animals who harm us and angels who care for us. But what's the purpose of this experience, this desert place, this Lent? Mark thinks its 'measurable outcome' is that one day we will learn to put our trust in the good news. Good news already present in our very midst. God's hope. God's justice. God's love. *Now is the time! Here comes God's reign! Change your hearts and lives, and trust this good news!* Desert periods mark significant transitions, and trust is the key quality of people who turn their lives around. Trust makes all things possible.

Most Lents, I turn to Martin Smith as a trustworthy guide. His words could easily be said of me.

I know that inertia, illusion and fear hold me back from answering God's invitation to enter into the truth and gain freedom. Yet even Jesus, free as he was from inertia like mine, needed the full force of the Wind of God to make him enter the testing ground of the desert. If I am going forward into that truth for which God knows I am ready at this point in my life, I am going to need the Spirit to drive me.¹

Is that true of you, too? Check-in with yourself each Sunday, each day. Reflect on your experience, your reactions to this desert experience. What comes up for you? What surprises you? What's difficult for you? What delights you? Can you recognize God's presence? Is there a new quality of trust growing inside of you? How are you right now, really? You may very well feel you were forced into this Lenten desert experience, that it wasn't your idea, either. But, if we aren't forced out of our comfort zone, we may never feel what it's like to be at one with God and each other. One day we will learn to put our trust in the good news. God's hope. God's justice. God's love present already in our very midst.

Once when Martin was hiking in the deserts of southern Utah, he saw something which led him to think about Jesus' vulnerability to the Spirit's driving force.

I had seen some tumbleweed, matted thorns uprooted and rolled into a ball, bowled along unresistingly by the hot desert wind. The desert is a place of forces which cannot be resisted, flash floods and winds from which there is no escape.

¹ Martin L. Smith, *A Season for the Spirit: Readings for the Days of Lent* (Cambridge, MA: Cowley Publications, 1991), p. 4.

He uses the image of tumbleweeds blown along by the hot desert wind to picture the desert experience of Jesus. Smith thinks the word ‘surrender’ characterizes it best. That is not how I picture the scene. I used to see Jesus in control, managing and problem-solving the diabolical onslaught with the ease of a competent high-level multi-task manager. Untouched. Unscathed. Invulnerable. But here is another possibility. ‘Not’, Smith writes, ‘the surrender to an enemy, but the opposite (and this is the important part), the laying down of resistance to the One who loves me infinitely more than I can guess, the One who is more on my side than I am myself.’ Jesus lays down his own resistance. This

act of letting go and handing myself over to the Spirit will bring me much closer to the experience of Jesus than the word discipline which so many of us have been trained to invoke at the beginning of Lent. It should help us smile at our anxious attempts to bring our life under control, the belt-tightening resolutions about giving up this or taking on that. What we are called to give up in Lent is control itself!²

Why does he suggest something so difficult? I’d rather give up sweets, take a spinning class or read prayerfully, again, *The Cloud of Unknowing*, than to let go of control. He thinks these ‘deliberate efforts to impose discipline on our lives only lead us further from the freedom which Jesus attained through surrender to the Spirit...’ To lay down our resistance to Love itself is the essential activity of Lent. To use up my life for others and live in a real world of vulnerability and truth. I practice Christian meditation as my central practice to be present to God and others, to touch the power that consoles, renews and transforms me.

When I was a newly ordained priest in my mid-twenties, Peggy and I were at a party and I received the best compliment I would ever receive. A woman noticed me and said unknowingly, ‘You know you look a lot like Ken Poppe, you know the curate at Christ Church.’ She must have thought I never left the church, that they hauled me out each Sunday and then put me back again, and that I certainly could not be at a party! I said to her very prophetically, ‘I am Ken Poppe.’ When I die the recording angel will not ask me why I wasn’t more like Martin Smith, but why I wasn’t more like Ken Poppe, more myself. At the end of the day, we are called to be that special person. That is the kind of Christian I need you to be in order for me to be the kind of person God has called me to be. Persons who practice religion to face, not flee from, daily life, to live a life transformed by Love!

God of the desert, as we follow Jesus into the unknown...let it be your bread we eat, your world we serve and you alone we worship.³ Amen.

The Very Reverend Kenneth W. Poppe

² Smith, pp. 5f.

³ *A New Zealand Prayer Book*, p. 573.