

## Sermon Starters February, 2012

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The Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany, B  
Feb. 5, 2012  
1st Reading: Isaiah 40:21-31  
Epistle: 1 Corinthians 9:16-27  
Gospel: Mark 1:29-39

Mark's Gospel brings us the story of Jesus' healing of Simon Peter's mother-in-law and the sick and demon-possessed of the town. So great were the numbers of those who brought their loved ones to Jesus for healing that Jesus worked long into the night and was exhausted. And so early the next day to be alone, he rose and went to a quiet place to open his heart to God in prayer and be renewed for the day. It was his way of allowing God to touch him and renew his heart.

The touch of the Master – that's what we all seek. It's why we bow our heads in prayer. It's why we come to worship seek the presence of God -- To be renewed and refreshed, healed and made whole. It's why we read these stories of Jesus' healing so intently. For we know that all of us are in need of healing. We all have hearts that need to be made whole. Without the touch of the Master, without a living faith in God, without a personal, living relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ, our lives are not whole. We run around like greyhounds at the race track, always chasing the rabbit but never reaching the goal. In Jesus' actions in the story today, we are given a glimpse of the life of Jesus and a direction for our lives as well. When Jesus was depleted, when his "compassion index" was most depleted, when his body was exhausted and his heart needed renewing, he sought out God in prayer. He found a place away and there he opened himself to God his Heavenly Father.

The lesson this reading brings us, the point of the story is clear. It is equally important for us that we step aside from our busy lives. We need to develop a spiritual discipline to fill us, a renewing pattern to depend on, a place apart in our daily lives to open our hearts to God and deepen ourselves in prayer. The stewardship of a good life always includes a lively spiritual discipline. The stewardship of a good life is always found as Jesus' did, in seeking as he did, the touch of the Master –so we can center our lives in faith of God.

Sixth Sunday after the Epiphany B

February 12, 2012

1st Reading: 2 Kings 5:1-14

Epistle: 1 Corinthians 10:(19-30) 31-11:1

Gospel: Mark 1:40-45

The healing of the man with leprosy is another story of God's healing power in Christ. The Great Physician touches one considered "untouchable." Such was the stigma in Jesus' day. Lepers were set apart. They were considered unclean. They were cast out – not only out of fear of contagion, but also for religious purposes as well. And in the story today, Jesus' touched the man with leprosy. Do you understand how remarkable that was? Jesus could have used just a word. He could have spoken "be healed" and the man would have been made well. But Jesus' touched him. Jesus' broke through the barriers of fear and rejection and touched the man and made him well.

The man in the story today needed touching. He needed that physical contact to be made whole. Jesus knew that and he reached out. And the point of the story is just that. God knows what we need most and God supplies it to us. "You can heal me if you are willing," the leper said to Jesus and Jesus touched him and say, "I am willing." I am willing, our God says to us. I am willing to reach across barriers standing and enter your life as well. Our God is willing. Our God is able to touch our lives as well. "If you reach out in faith to find me, I am willing to make your life new.

Our stewardship response to God is always a response to a God who is willing and abundantly able to make our lives new. Our God is a God of abundance. There is no want that God cannot fill. When we reach out to our God in need, our God always responds to us with grace. The grace of healing, the grace of abundance, the grace of new life for all. And our response to God's grace is always the leper's response of telling. Telling others of our interaction with God in our lives. Because our God is always willing.

Transfiguration Sunday B

February 19, 2012

1st Reading: 2 Kings 2:1-12 or Exodus 34:29-35

Epistle: 2 Corinthians 3:12-13 (14-18); 4:1-6

Gospel: Mark 9:2-9

When we lived in Japan as missionaries, we lived in the snow country of Japan. Each winter in Sapporo, we'd received 20 feet of snow each season – that's feet not inches. It wasn't unusual for it to snow every night, sometimes more than a foot or two! The snow would pile up to the roof line. It was a constant battle to keep a path cleared from the front door to the street. But as difficult as it was in Sapporo, our friends who lived in Kushiro, a small fishing village on the eastern edge of Hokkaido, Japan's northernmost island, had it worse. It wasn't snow country there. Instead, they had fog.

I remember visiting them once. It was an eight-hour train ride from Sapporo to the other end of the island where they lived. Dave met us at the train station in heavy fog and took us for a drive around town. I remember sitting back in the seat and buckling up my seat belt tight. The fog was so heavy you couldn't see a thing, but that didn't slow Dave down. He zipped right around town. He knew the hills and curves, the landmarks and intersections because he had driven them so many times. He had to trust his memory to lead him until the fog lifted and he could see.

The Transfiguration of Jesus is like that. Jesus was transfigured to give the disciples a glimpse, a moment of clear vision of his place in the mystery of God. Jesus appeared with those others and overshadowed them. And the disciples who followed were told to listen. "This is my son, the One who I am pleased with. Listen to him."

In the fog of life we live in, with the uncertainties that we face, this is an important lesson for us to learn – listen. Listen to God because God can see what we cannot. Listen to God because we know God cares about us even more than we care about ourselves. Listen to God because God knows the way when we cannot see through the fog. Stewardship is always based upon this knowing – knowing that God is always faithful. We steward our lives with the faithful trusting that God is always able to do far more than we can ever hope for and God cares for us far better than we can care for ourselves.

Ash Wednesday, B

February 22, 2012

1st Reading: Joel 2:12-19

Epistle: 2 Corinthians 5:20b-6:10

Gospel: Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

When I was a young pastor, I once preached a sermon series on the Ten Commandments. For the eighth commandment – "Thou shall not steal" – inspired by an example in one of the sermon preparation notes I had read, I put a large box in the rear of the church and encouraged my parishioners to drop off any item they had stolen over the years as a sign of repentance. The little church in the small town where I preached was never locked, so it was easy for people to come by unnoticed. During the week I was shocked at the items that found their way into the box in the back. Clothing, toys, tools, gum and hotel towels were dropped off. When I mentioned the response to a neighboring pastor, she said, "That's what sermons should be about – applying truth to our lives."

That's nice, but I was still surprised that church members would be guilty of so much theft. It's like the time-honored story of a Catholic priest who was working in the inner city. He was walking down an alley one evening when a young man came down the alley behind him and poked a knife in his back. "Give me your money," the young man with the knife said. The priest opened his jacket and reached for his wallet, exposing his clerical collar. "Oh, I'm sorry, Father," the young man said. "I didn't see your collar. I don't want your money." Trembling with fear, the priest removed a cigar from his shirt pocket and offered it to the young man. "Here," he said. "Have a cigar." "Oh, no, Father," the young man relied. "I gave up cigars for Lent."

Lent is about more than ashes. It's about more than giving up something we want. It's about opening up our hearts to our Almighty Father and changing more than just a bad habit or two. It's about letting God enter into us and give us a new start in life. It's about encountering our God in private and putting our lives in order. It's about learning the truth of those stewardship words – "Store up treasures in heaven. For where your heart is, there your treasure will be also."

First Sunday of Lent B

February 26, 2012

1st Reading: Genesis 22:1-18

Epistle: James 1:12-18

Gospel: Mark 1:9-15

There is a strange story that came out in the news last year. Police stopped a car with twenty passengers packed in it – none of whom was clothed. No, it was not a college fraternity prank. According to the story, a Pentecostal preacher from down south somewhere told police he and his family fled their home because they had decided the Devil was after them. Along the way they decided that their clothes were "possessed" and they discarded them along with three cars that had run out of gas. Squeezing five people in the trunk and fifteen people crammed up front, they ventured along. When the police tried to pull over the curious car, they sped into the woods and struck a tree. At last report, the preacher faced a number of charges and the family was being housed in a nearby shelter - with clothes on, I would assume.

There is something about Lent that we must agree upon and it is that like Jesus, we all have a time when we must confront Satan. This doesn't mean we will flee our homes and throw our clothes away. But it does mean that like Jesus, all of us are tempted to sin. And none of us alone is strong enough to prevail. That's why we must turn to Jesus. That's why we must cling fast to Christ in faith. It is only with the help of Jesus, only by trusting in him can we endure temptation and overcome.

The good news this for first Sunday in Lent is that our God understands. Our God has been tempted, too. Our God has experienced it all. In Lent, we accompany our Savior into the wilderness, so that God can lead us out the other side. We offer our hearts in prayer and worship, so that strengthened we can walk with Christ in new life. It is a universal religious and stewardship principle. Like the seed put in the ground in wintertime, by dying to self we rise to new life in Christ. And by rising from the death like the wheat seed, we produce the fruits of faith in God. May your Lent be a time of such renewal and new birth.