

Lent 2009 A Journey of Discovery

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A little over a year ago I was introducing myself to my new faith community, all of you, and celebrating the beginning of our ministry together. And four days later we were in Lent, that season when the church follows Christ into the wilderness. That season of cleaning the house of the soul, sorting motivations, honing judgments and insights, making amends, and turning hearts and hands to the business of realizing the kingdom of God.

In the reading from Mark for this first Sunday of Lent we hear about Jesus' baptism in the Jordan, his time in the wilderness, and his return to Galilee to preach the Good News. Notice that his desert experience comes between his baptism and the start of his public ministry. The Spirit descends on him, God affirms Jesus as the Son, and then the Spirit drives Jesus to leave the comfort of home and companions for the solitude and spare landscape of the desert. Before Jesus could embark on his preaching mission, first he had to wrestle with his identity and his calling, deal with distractions and temptations that would divert him from that call, and then decide to live into it. I think the scriptures do not assume that it was a given that Jesus would resist the lures of power and prestige, and choose instead the role of itinerant teacher and preacher. And he did so only after many days of soul-searching. Fresh from the waters of the Jordan, the questions must have swarmed around him: What am I supposed to do? Am I ready? How will I do it? Will anyone help me? Will anyone listen? Will anyone follow? What if I fail?

Through trial and prayer and the Spirit's guidance, Jesus resolved whatever doubts he may have had and embraced his call.

Personally and corporately, as members of this diocese and as a nation we have ventured into a kind of wilderness and we are faced with the need to assess where we are, where we need to be, and how to get there. Call it a journey of discovery, or recovery. Because of the opportunities of new leadership, or driven by the loss of security and economic challenge, we are asking hard questions, evaluating priorities, and struggling to discern the right route to renewal and recovery.

Nationally, the first milestone has been the passage of the stimulus bill. What difference it makes won't be known for months or even years, and in the meantime many people are facing frightening prospects—layoffs, foreclosures, reductions in wages and salaries, postponed education or retirement, and relocation in the search for opportunity or a more sustainable life.

The adjustment has not come easily or come at all for many. Assumptions have been shredded, world views turned upside down. Loss of livelihood or the diminishing hope for prosperity has immobilized some people with disbelief, and demoralized others with self-doubt. It has sent some people spiraling into resentment and retribution, often showing up in violence against other family members or friends. (Calls to the national domestic violence hotline increased by nearly a quarter in 2008 and over half the callers were dealing with job loss, foreclosure or other aspects of financial stress in their households).

Some people who have been downsized or displaced have chosen a different tack. I heard an amazing story recently on National Public Radio about a New York City investment manager detailing how he lost his vice presidency post, his six-figure income and all the trappings it purchased; and how he was forced to rearrange his lifestyle and perspective. He finally landed a job cleaning out cages at the zoo—and from there another part-time job at one of the big box home improvement centers. Eventually, he worked his way back to an investment firm for an entry level position. And he decided that was enough. When senior management offered a promotion, he refused. It would be the worst thing he could do if he accepted, he told them. His derailment had forced him to realign and reform not only his manner of living but his attitude toward it, and he was not willing to surrender that gain for a higher rung on the wealth ladder.

For some of us the journey into reassessment and reappraisal is an option, for others it is a matter of survival. For this fellowship called the Diocese of Chicago it is a little of both. We can continue doing faithfully what we have been doing, following the same path and keeping an eye out for rocks and cliffs. We could keep sailing along, just scanning the horizon for storm clouds. I am sure there were quite a few on the banks of the Jordan who did not follow Christ into the water, or were mending or casting nets at the sea of Galilee and chose to keep mending and casting. And that would be a comfortable choice. But I don't believe it would be the choice for the kind of discipleship that Christ offered Simon and Andrew. He asked them to step outside their zone of familiarity and discover new avenues for opening hearts to God.

I offered my understanding of this call at convention last November with the vision challenge: Grow the Church, Form the Faithful, Change the World, now immortalized as a bumper sticker. At that convention hundreds of you responded with dreams and declarations, lines of poetry and prayers, and testimonies and plans. You offered these reflections and recommendations with enthusiasm and earnestness, and I am reading this as a willingness to move out of our comfort zones and into the risky water of Christ's invitation.

What you have shared has been catalogued and summarized on spreadsheets, and I have invited the Diocesan Council, the deans and the diocesan staff to discern currents and directions for our common mission from this data, and to consider how it might shape the way we order and prioritize our ministry. I have also asked an outside consulting firm to lend their skills in defining our identity and strengths as an organization, and crafting the branding and message that supports the mission.

Our work will continue as a collective discernment. On March 28 at St. Andrew's, Downers Grove we will gather again to review what we've learned, generate more insights and ideas, and map the routes that we might take to realize them in our lives. We will regroup at the Leadership and Ministry Fair in April and at Diocesan Convention to further refine our vision.

Where will this lead us? The simple answer I hope is to better discipleship, bringing the Good News, the best news there could possibly be, to a world in need. That's what our discernment is about. We're looking for ways to focus our mission and ministry, some of which are already clear and some which we haven't seen yet at all. Here are some I see: an emergent

church plant, strengthening our Hispanic congregations, developing regional ministries, a partnership with Seabury-Western seminary, exploring what total common ministry would mean in our diocese—these and many more are possible as we weigh our options. All of us have a part in this venture, and where we arrive will depend on what we bring to the journey.

It will take some time but it won't be endless. The point of the journey—whether 40 days in the Judean wilderness or 40 hours in a Lenten retreat—is to return eventually renewed and recommitted to proclaiming in word and action the Good News of God in Christ.

Endings make new beginnings possible. Chapters come to an end, college comes to an end, trips come to an end, seasons come to an end. But the endings are not the whole story. Endings make space for new beginnings. Even in the face of anxiety, pain or grief, God is with us, inviting us to turn corners and open doors

The people of St. Hilary's in Prospect Heights know this. Their chapter as a congregation at the corner of Hintz road and Schoenberg road ended February 15 in a Eucharist that celebrated what had been and what was to come. For them the wilderness lasted the better part of a year as they assessed where God was calling them. Many are now making connections in new congregations and others are discerning where to connect. There is no denying their grief and loss as a distinct community, but there is so much to celebrate in their willingness to continue their journey in other parishes. Even as they were bringing closure to their ministry at that corner of Prospect Heights, the people of One in Christ were meeting in Park Ridge to discern whether to leave their building and relocate their corporate life to St. Hilary's space. Their conversation will continue for the next few weeks, and perhaps later this year, the same Good News will resonate in a new language as the mostly Korean congregation offers its witness in Prospect Heights. Endings do set the stage for beginnings.

Lent for members of St. Hilary's and One in Christ will be a journey of discovery, a period not so much about mourning what was lost, or relinquished, but what is to be found. All of us might join with them as we embark on our journeys this Lent and rediscover the exhilaration of entering and emerging from the water of the Jordan.

In Christ,

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