

# Sermon, 1 Lent A

**Matthew 4:1-11**

*Preached Sunday, Feb. 10, 2008 at St. Philip's, Brevard by RDF*

Some years, the season of Lent actually feels like Lent.

Other years, it seemed as if I was mostly going through the motions of Lent with the Church. "Things are OK with me," I said to myself. "My life is going pretty well; I don't feel as if I'm in the wilderness." In those years, my soul struggled to get on board with this season of penitence and renewal.

This, however, is not one of those years — not for me, and perhaps not for you or for our parish as a whole. The economy is slowing down, the housing market is in a slump, no one knows who our next president will be; and it seems as if Wall Street and the weather are competing to have the more unpredictable behavior. For a while here at St. Philip's, someone has been getting sick or worse every week, and I sense a feeling of spiritual uncertainty and restlessness in our congregation. In a moment, leaders of our Vestry will come and tell us about some financial challenges we're facing as a parish. Speaking for myself, my soul is weary and the path of grief that I am walking feels longer and harder than I'd expected it to be.

This is what I mean when I say that it truly feels like Lent.

We're not told what it felt like for Jesus to be alone in the wilderness. But we do know that the Holy Spirit led him there for 40 days and 40 nights. During that time, he fasted and prayed and struggled with the temptations of the Evil One. In the face of these challenges, our Savior was incredibly strong and brave. Yet, I can easily imagine there were also times when he felt lost, bewildered, and afraid.

It's often been said that in the life and ministry of Jesus, a new Israel — a new chosen people — came into being. Especially in the Gospel according to Matthew, we see how the life of Jesus parallels the life of Israel. Just as the Israelites spent 40 years in the wilderness, Jesus does the same for 40 days. God used those 40 years to spiritually prepare the Israelites to enter the Promised Land. In a similar way, God used Jesus' 40 days to prepare him for his ministry and the challenges which lay ahead of him and his followers.

I would like to suggest to you this morning that we are in such a season here at St. Philip's. The restlessness, uncertainty and fatigue are indications that we are in a kind of spiritual desert in our life together. Every congregation goes through stages in its life and ministry. There are seasons of great energy and clear vision; there are times of planning and hard work; there are seasons of busy-ness and accomplishment. But, as a direct result of these, there also must be times of rest, contemplation and eventual renewal. There must be a season for counting our blessings and waiting for direction from the Holy Spirit.

At our recent Vestry retreat, your leaders made a list of the things we've accomplished together recently as a parish. It is long and impressive, including the capital campaign and church renovation, the sesquicentennial celebration, the reconfiguration of our organizational structures, and last year's mutual ministry review. We couldn't have achieved any of these without God's grace or your active support. Accomplishments of this sort do not happen, however, without expending considerable energy, effort and resources.

In their wisdom, members of the Vestry agreed last month that 2008 should not be a year with a long list of goals and special events beyond our core ministries. It is time, in other words, for a sabbath rest from busy-ness. It's time for a fallow period to wait for our spiritual energy to be renewed. It's time to look for a new sense of vision from God.

I often think of St. Philip's as a ship built for ministry. Using this metaphor, I am not suggesting that we now should stay on shore, take down our sails, and put the boat in dry dock! We need to hold our course and keep the ship afloat. Experienced sailors know, however, that there are times in a long voyage when it's helpful to lower the anchor and stay in one place. A respite gives the crew time to get their bearings and replenish the supplies before plotting a new course. The rudder still works and the winds still blow. But, for a time, the sails move with the wind rather than at an angle to it.

If you agree with me that we're in a new season in our spiritual journey, I ask you to do some things during Lent for the good of St. Philip's:

- 1. Pray for the parish and its leaders.** Pray that God will use this season in our life to give us a true sabbath rest and a renewed vision for ministry.
- 2. Count your personal blessings and ours as a congregation.** St. Philip's is a good and faithful parish. We have many resources to offer our community, the wider Church and the world. Our future is strong and filled with hope. Recognizing our gifts and strengths will help us discern the future to which God is calling us as a church.
- 3. Re-commit yourself to Christ and this part of his Body.** This is not a time to shrink back or become inactive from Jesus or the Church. When it comes to sabbath time, there is a big difference between passive hibernation and active engagement. Come to church every week, say your prayers, support the budget and continue your usual activities in ministry.
- 4. Tell others what's happening.** Tell the people who aren't here today that we want their prayers, presence and participation. We need all St. Philipians to help discern the future of our life and ministry together. If you or they have a sense of what God might have in store for us, tell a Vestry member, Ministry Council leader or staff member. Later in 2008, we will be asking for this kind of input to create a ministry plan for 2009 and beyond. The Holy Spirit can use any of us to help build the Kingdom in this place.

Jesus and the Israelites remind us that being in the wilderness does not have to be a time of being only lost, confused or afraid. When the Israelites needed food and shelter, God provided. When Jesus needed strength to resist temptation, God provided. When the Israelites didn't know which way to go, God sent them a pillar of fire. And when Christ needed rest after 40 days and 40 nights, God sent angels to minister to him.

I believe that our loving and merciful God will do the same for us. Pray with me that we will remain faithful to Christ and each other — until God decides we are ready to enter the Promised Land.