

## **A fast that make a difference**

The Rev. Mark Wilkinson, Rector  
St. Aidan's Episcopal Church  
Virginia Beach VA 23452

Lent 1  
Mark 1

I can't think of a church season that runs more counter to our culture than Lent. Advent come close since it is about waiting and nobody in our world wants to wait for anything. Lent however is about fasting, discipline and wilderness time as our gospel describes. Wilderness time can be many things, physical, spiritual or emotional. All of these can be thin places, places where we can sense and respond to God's presence. God is always present in the wilderness, whether we are aware of that presence or not. God is there.

For thousands of years people have known that while the wilderness can be a frightening and threatening place it is also a place of opportunity. The wilderness is a place where we are formed, whether we want to be formed or not. Our very congregation as a whole is in a wilderness period along with all the mainstream churches. The questions we are asking in our vision process are being asked or should be asked by every church of every denomination as we wander in the wilderness of today's world.

Many cultures around the world understand the importance, the necessity of wilderness experiences. American Indians, especially the young men, would be given a name at birth, but it was not their name for life. When they came of age they would go into the wilderness to find their true name, their true self. They would be formed and marked for life by their experience. We have lost that concept in today's world. Richard Rohr believes that we need to reclaim this willingness to enter into the wilderness to find who God calls us to be. Without this he believes we can never leave childhood and enter into the second half of life as he calls it. Lent is our annual opportunity to embrace the wilderness and allow it to help us see where God is calling us and who God is calling us to be.

Many people fear making this step. Many are afraid that if they really open up to God there will be a heavy price to pay. However what they forget is that there is a price to pay if we do not open ourselves up to God and the Spirit. The reward of traveling through the wilderness is a deeper relationship with God, Christ and the Holy Spirit. The reward is being able to move forward with the Spirit on the great journey upon which God has invited to embark.

This year I have a different view of wilderness time. A pilgrimage like the Camino is just such a wilderness time and there was some method to my deciding to schedule 40 days on the Camino. I was expecting the physical challenge especially those first few days as I went from sea level to almost 5000 feet in just 2 days. What I didn't anticipate was the mental and psychological challenge, and yes the spiritual challenge of those 500 miles. The Rev. John Baldwin said the first week will break you physically and the Meseta the

vast plane breaks your psychologically. However the rest puts you all back together once your defenses are down. He was absolutely right. Fasting and pilgrimages are about being open to God. Sometimes we need to be in wilderness places to be vulnerable enough to God so that we allow God in.

How do we prepare to enter Lent? Well much like I did for the Camino. Preparing was about seriously looking at what I did not need to take with me. I was told, "Do not get a pack any larger than 40 liters." Now that is not very much space, but it was great advice. Lent is a time when we can look at what we can do without. Now this does not mean depriving yourself, but looking at what is essential. This is also about looking at your pack and deciding what in there is going to hold you back? There was a place in St. Jean where you could check-in and get your credentials. They had a scale there for people to weigh their packs. Many people were encouraged to re-examine all the stuff they had in their packs. Those who had walked the Camino before did not come with 90 liter packs, but I saw many first time people who did.

On Ash Wednesday I showed a short video about the idea of fasting during Lent. The writer suggested that we live in a world that is full of scarcity, real and imagined. So why a fast that emphasizes scarcity? When Jesus says in our passage "put oil on your head, wash your face" he is talking about a fast that is not about showing the world how you are depriving yourself to be holy. That is your ego talking and the fast does not gain you much except to feed your ego.

The film suggested a fast where you give up something not that you like, but something that holds you back. Something that puts distance between God and you, which is our definition of sin! Consider the question the people with really heavy packs were asked about their backpacks. What is in here that will hold you back? What is in there that weighs you down and slows you up rather than will make your journey successful..

Likewise in Lent what is there that you can fast from that will in turn give you something more, make your life and your relationship with God better and stronger.

This is not about giving up something so you lose weight or improve your health by exercising. Now there is nothing wrong with that and I encourage you to do that, but Lent is about our relationship with God. The film suggested giving up shame. I can think of many other things, being judgmental, greedy, anxious or any other number things like this, which all interfere with our relationship with God. This is a way to give up something for Lent that truly will make a difference in a sinful world. You cannot change others, you can only change yourself. Only you can be the first one to start to repair a relationship with God, another or creation.

This is also a fast where you can "put oil on your head and wash your face" and enter this fast moving forward in your spiritual life. I closed my Ash Wednesday sermon with some thoughts on fasting and feasting by the Rev. Ann Fontaine. I would like to read them here and as you to consider seriously taking these or at least one of them on this Lent.

Fast from judgment, Feast on compassion  
Fast from greed. Feast on sharing  
Fast from Scarcity, Feast on abundance  
Fasts from fear. Feast on peace  
Fast from lies. Feast on truth  
Fast from gossip. Feast on praise  
Fast from anxiety. Feast on patience  
Fast from evil, Feast on kindness  
Fast from apathy. Feast on engagement  
Fast from discontent. Feast on gratitude  
Fast from noise. Feast on silence  
Fast from discouragement. Feast on hope  
Fast from hatred. Feast on love.