

The Ash Wednesday liturgy invites us to the observance of a holy Lent by calling us to *self-examination*...and *repentance*.

So I want to begin by asking you a question for self-examination: *When you think about your life, recently, or with a long view, do you tend to remember first the struggles or the blessings?* Maybe it would depend on the *immediate circumstances* of our lives as to which is more on the surface of our awareness—goodness or hardship. Maybe it would depend on our *personalities* as to how we tend to first see our lives. Our lives are full of both struggles and blessings--*but how do we attend to both?*

I wonder about this in response to the gospel reading today. Studying it this time, I was struck by a rather significant *disproportionality* between Jesus' struggles and blessings. Mark tells of the *beginning of Jesus' public ministry*...by naming *Jesus' baptism*...then his *temptation in the wilderness*, and then the beginning of *Jesus' public speaking*. What really struck me about this, which I never quite noticed before, is that there is such a difference of *time* when you compare Jesus' *baptism* to his *temptation*.

Jesus' baptism was accompanied by a powerful spiritual vision...which only Jesus could see...of the heavens being "torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him". And then Jesus heard a voice...that only he could hear...saying to him: "You are my Son, the Beloved, with you I am well pleased." It was a dramatic vision of *God's blessing* personally addressed to Jesus. That *vision* may have taken just a few *moments*.,and Jesus' *baptism* just a few *minutes*. And then that powerful spiritual experience of divine blessing was over.

But then, the Spirit drove Jesus out into the wilderness. And there Jesus had another intense spiritual experience. But this time it was not of blessing, but...*temptation*...and *torment*...by spiritual forces identified as an "Accuser", i.e. Satan...and wild beasts. Even as Jesus was accompanied by angels there, it was a long painful experience of being unwelcome by the spiritual forces of this world.

It is striking to me that there is such a disproportionality...between the duration of *time* that Jesus experienced receiving the blessing of God...and the duration of *time* that Jesus experienced his struggle with the unwelcome of the spiritual forces of this world. |

And this brings me back to the question for our self-examination: *When you think about your life, recently, or with a long view, do you tend to remember first the struggles or the blessings?* Have the struggles in your life seemed to last longer than the blessings? Has "ordinary life" seemed to dwarf the moments of your awareness of the goodness of God? If so, then, in that regard, *Jesus' experience of his life might not have been so different from our own.* |

But this story of Jesus has another part. When Jesus finally emerged from the wilderness, his mind was no longer focused on his wilderness experience. And we can tell by what he immediately began to teach in his public speaking. He did not begin his public ministry by telling people about his struggle...and the spiritual Accuser...and the wild beasts of spiritual torment.

Instead, Jesus spoke of *repentance*—the need to turn our focus around and move in a different direction. He said it this way: "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news."

Whatever may come this Lenten season, as we make our way forward in time...whatever our self-examination reveals...whatever hardships might come...whatever tedium of the supposedly ordinary--the example of Jesus himself is a reminder...that the key to our lives remains...the sheer moments of blessing...of goodness received...of indelible pictures of joy that still remain with us...and the goodness of God to be loved and trusted.

*Believe in the good news.*