

*The First Sunday in Lent*  
*March 1, 2009*  
*Text: Mark 1:9-15*  
*The Reverend David B. Hodges*

A number of years ago when I was serving as the associate rector of a parish in Austin, Texas, we were baptizing a group of children one Saturday afternoon. It was Holy Saturday, the day before Easter, and I don't remember how exactly how many children they were that day, but I remember there were a lot. There were so many, in fact, that the families were lined up all the way across the floor in front of the church. When I'd met with the parents for some instruction, one of them expressed some concern about how her child, who was probably three or four, might behave during his baptism. Trying to using my best pastoral skills, I assured her that she did not need to worry and that everything would be ok.

As the other priest and I began to make our way down the line, baptizing and anointing with oil, you could almost sense that something was about to happen. As you can imagine, with that many children and their siblings, it was a little loud and chaotic anyway, but then we got to him, and immediately I understood why his mother had been concerned -- and why I had been so wrong. Never before that or since then have I ever baptized anyone by coercion, but we had no choice, because there was no way he was going to just let it happen. He went beside his mother,

behind his mother, he got on the floor, he started screaming, and if I had not carefully held on to him, he would have left the building. Finally, we managed to control him enough to do the baptism. I know it was valid because there was water and it was done in the name of the Trinity, but other than that I am not sure what happened.

I have often thought about that boy and all it took for him to be baptized and to become a Christian. I have wondered what his journey of faith, which began with so much struggle, has been like since then. Like him and like some of you, at times I have found that my own journey of faith has at times been one of struggle, and it has taken some unexpected twists and turns -- but somehow, and in a variety of ways and through it all, I have been able to sense and feel the power and presence of God in my life and in my ministry.

This morning we have heard a story about another baptism. It is found in the first few verses of the first chapter of Mark's Gospel, and in this Gospel it is used in a unique and powerful way to literally introduce us Jesus Christ. Before this there is no mention of his birth, his childhood, or who his parents were. In this account of the life of Jesus, we are introduced to him as he is being baptized by John the Baptist. We are told that as he comes up out of the water of the Jordan River, the Spirit of God comes down on him and identifies him. Then the very

next thing that happens is that the same Spirit pushes Jesus out into a place that is described as being the wilderness. It is a place where he then spent forty days being tempted by Satan and where he encountered wild beasts.

It was only after those forty days of struggle that his ministry began. After that time, filled with temptation and danger, with hunger and with what must have been extreme loneliness, after that time of prayer and reflection, Jesus was ready to begin his journey of ministry. It was a journey filled with wonderful things that involved people being healed and raised from the dead, and a journey in which he said some very important things while he taught and spent time with people, and a journey that ultimately led to his death on a cross and his resurrection.

On this Sunday each year, we focus on the time Jesus spent in the wilderness after his baptism, preparing to do what God had sent him to do. Today is the First Sunday in the holy time of preparation before Easter that we call Lent. During this time, we are asked to prepare ourselves by being more intentional about looking at our lives, confessing our sins to God, and trying to do some things that are meant to help us grow and to develop as spiritual people. In Lent, we are encouraged to give something up and/or to take something on, to behave in different ways, to exercise some discipline that we might not have, to intentionally do some things that

will force us to probe more deeply into our relationship with Jesus Christ and into what it means to be a one his disciples.

Last week there was an article in *The Charlotte Observer* about dirt, and specifically about how important dirt is to the vineyards where grapes are grown that are used to make wine (“The dirt in the grapes is more than just the dirt on the grapes”/Catherine Rabb/ 2/25/09).

*...The roots of great wine start in the earth*, the author says, and she then goes on to describe places where the dirt is so precious that when it rains, the workers try to collect any that runs down the slopes and places where they have to take off their boots before they leave the vineyard.

Grapes change the minerals in the soil wherever they are grown, to help the plants grow and to adapt to different vineyards, and that is what makes wine taste different when grapes are grown in different vineyards. The author concluded her article by saying this. *...each bottle* (of wine) *is a chance to experience something and some place new. Digging into the dirt is part of the fun.*

As we begin to walk through these days of Lent on our individual journeys of faith, and as we work to prepare our hearts and minds to celebrate the wonder and mystery of the

resurrection of Jesus on Easter Day, we do so knowing that this particular year will be different. It will be different for you and for me because for the last nine years we have had the opportunity to dig in the dirt together, and now that time has come to an end. But it ends with an opportunity for us to be thankful for what is happening in this vineyard called Holy Comforter, and for what has developed and grown here because there is such good dirt. It also ends with an opportunity for each of us to now have a chance to experience something new that I believe will help us to know more about God and more about God's will for each of us.

I began with a story about how one young boy's journey of faith started with such struggle at his baptism. I also said that there have been times when my journey of faith has been one of struggle but that through the struggle, and maybe because of it, I have been able to sense and to feel the power and presence of God. During this part of my journey, that is what I have always felt and experienced in this holy place with you. I have felt and sensed the power and presence of God with you every Sunday morning in the Holy Eucharist and in Holy Baptism. I have felt and sensed the power and presence of God with you through the many ways you have allowed me to be your priest and invited me into your lives. I have felt and sensed the power and presence of God with you through the variety of ministries that are carried out in the name of

Christ in this parish as we have worked to minister to others and to each other. I have felt and sensed the power and presence of God with you as we have struggled to make sense of our lives and to find God during times of tragedy and death. I have felt and sensed the power and presence of God with you as I have blessed your marriages, your babies and your homes. I have felt and sensed the power and presence of God with you as we have worked to make this parish one that is open and available to anyone who walks in the door. I have felt and sensed the power and presence of God with you as we have extended our hearts and hands in love to those in need in this community and far beyond.

As we begin to walk our separate ways, my hope is that you will continue to dig in this dirt together, and to use the good soil that forms the foundation of this place that has been part of this city now for one hundred and five years, to always focus on those things that matter most, and that will draw you and others closer to God. Even though we will work in different vineyards, we will always be connected through Christ, who over and over again invites us -- and at times pushes us -- into the wilderness with him.

As we do that, we can be assured of this: When Jesus takes us into the wilderness, into that place of uncertainty filled with the unknown and maybe even with wild beasts, when we

come out of it we will be ready and able to carry out the ministry that he is always calling to in his holy Church. Whenever we are willing to follow Jesus, no matter where it takes us, all we are asked to do is just that: follow, and to be faithful.

A contemporary monk was asked by a group who had come to his monastery what recommendations he could make for what they should do during Lent. He answered them by saying, "To live in today's world as a faithful person is enough... There is no need to take on more." My deepest prayer for you during this Lenten season, and in all the seasons that will follow, is that you will continue to be faithful as you work to love God and to reach out in love to other people through your ministry at Holy Comforter. And remember that as we try to be faithful, God is always faithful, just as God always has been. And for that we can give thanks to God on this day, when I give my thanks to God for you, for your lives, your faithfulness, and for the work and ministry that we have shared together in the name of Christ in this wonderful parish. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.