

**The First Sunday in Lent
Holy Comforter Church
The Rev. John E. Shields
February 21, 2010**

Just in case you missed the news: it is Lent. No doubt you gathered something was up when we started walking around the church chanting the Great Litany. It is a once a year thing – and it has a purpose – to focus on the season of Lent as the season of introspection, study, repentance and renewal.

Inasmuch as the Litany is lengthy, you will be blessed with a short sermon. (What can I say? Grace Happens!)

One of the reasons that I always schedule the Litany for the first Sunday in Lent is to remind us of our tradition. The Litany is one of the oldest pieces of liturgy. It is particularly Anglican and it is particularly appropriate for a season of penitence.

So it is that this piece of liturgy doesn't just happen – it is not somebody's idea of "hey, let's try this!"

No, it is a litany that has been handed down through the ages – by doing it, we are connected with our past, with our roots, we are joined with the communion of saints "...who from labors rest."

So it is we begin our Lenten with season with the litany – an ancient liturgy of penitence and petition.

In our gospel, Jesus begins his ministry with his baptism and then is immediately thrust into the desert to spend forty days in that arid wasteland dealing with the temptations of Satan.

Certainly the fact that Jesus must face Satan –not some caricature of a little red man with a tail and pitchfork -- rather the forces of wickedness – the things that separate us from God and each other – this event is a seminal and powerful one in Jesus’ life and ministry.

It must be that Jesus had to deal with this before he could be about the mission to which he was called. He had to reckon with these temptations in order to understand and then pursue his call.

So we begin our Lent with a liturgy that forces us to look at our lives. (Was anything left out? I understand that an ancient form said something like “From ghostes (sic) and beasties and things that go...bump in the night --- Good Lord deliver us.”)

Maybe I told this before, I can’t remember --- if so please forgive me – but it works here.

Several years ago, we were on a Baltic Sea cruise. On this particular day we were on a bus somewhere in Sweden. The guide, a most pleasant young woman, pointed out that folks were at their clotheslines beating their carpets. She said that they do this every Saturday.

Then she said something I’ve never forgotten: “Every home has a vacuum cleaner, but we certainly don’t believe in them.”

Wherein I got out my pencil and paper and wrote it down, thinking, “That will preach some day.” (And it has on several occasions)

“Every home has a vacuum cleaner, but we certainly don’t believe in them.”

Here we are in Lent. Lent, that time in the church year that asks us to look at “...that things we have done and left undone...”

Lent, that time of self-examination when we hang out --- on our psychic clotheslines --- the dusty and the dirty stuff of our lives.

Lent, that time when we work toward refreshing and cleansing our souls that we might become (in the words of the Prayer Book) “...a reasonable, holy and living sacrifice unto (God)...”

What I am curious about is this: do we treat our faith like those rug beaters are treating their vacuum cleaners? Oh sure, we all have it (faith) but when really put to the test, we really don't believe in it.

Are we still trying to pound the dust and dirt out of our lives, thinking that there is no help for us, no relief from our failures and alienation? Are we convinced that reconciliation is a ‘do it yourself project’ and that we are in this alone?

It is as if we have taken into the homes of our hearts our baptismal vows, our profession of faith in Christ as our Savior, and we have promised to follow where he leads, “...*but we certainly don't believe in them.*”

**Henry Nouwen has written that: The long painful history of the Church is the history of a people ever and again tempted to choose power over love, control over the Cross and being a leader rather than being led.” (*Synthesis*, March 1, 2009)
The good news is that we are not helpless or hopeless. We do have tools and opportunities to help deal with our common dilemma.**

Some suggestions: Take some time by yourself during this Lent. Take some time being alone and being quiet. No, don't play your I-pod, your CD player or radio – just be quiet.

Take some time during this Lent with a book of devotions (like Forward Day by Day or the one from Episcopal Relief and Development that is available to you today – in the back or at the desk. Choose a book of the Bible --- maybe one of the gospels --- and read a chapter every day.

Take some time this Lent in Prayer. Pray for God to give you an open heart and an open mind so that you might better discern God's call in your life.

Try something new like reading Morning Prayer from the Book of Common Prayer or one of the other daily services --- Noonday Prayers, Evening Prayer, or Compline – try out some of the Daily Devotions for Individuals and Families (page 136ff BCP)

Join with others during this time – others who are reflecting on their faith journey – join us on Wednesday evenings and be challenged and inspired by the visiting Priests we are bringing you as speakers.

I can assure you that if you are intentional with your spiritual practices – including some practice of self-denial you may also have taken on – you will find Lent a powerful period of spiritual growth and renewal. You will be blessed.

You may recall that I said “Lent, that time of self-examination when we hangout --- on our psychic clotheslines, the dusty and the dirty stuff of our lives.”

I recall the sermon from last Wednesday – “remember you are dust – and God loves dust.”