

## Deeper than Dust

A sermon preached by the Rev. Canon Joanna C. Leiserson at Christ Church Cathedral, Cincinnati, Ohio, on Sunday, February 21, 2010.

*Deuteronomy 26:1-11; Romans 10:8b-13; Luke 4:1-13*

One summer, I went with my family on a cross-country vacation drive from our home in San Francisco to New York. At some point on the interstate, we missed an exit—at Petaluma, California, around two hours outside of San Francisco. Because of this, we found ourselves going through Reno, Nevada rather than Lake Tahoe. Now, these two cities are not very far apart. All of the cities in Nevada are pretty much squished into the far western border of Nevada, kind of in the crook of California's elbow: Reno, Lake Tahoe, Las Vegas, Carson City. After that, when you go east, you hit the Nevada desert, which is pretty much all of Nevada. The difference between Reno and Lake Tahoe is that Lake Tahoe has the highway to someplace, and Reno has a road through the desert.

After you fill up on gas and leave Reno going east, there is a two-lane highway. The first highway sign you see says: "NEXT GAS STATION IN 193 MILES." It's two hours before you pass a car going the other way.

When evening came, we stopped somewhere and camped out for the night. The Nevada desert is pretty much like how I envision the wilderness where Jesus ended up, being led by the Spirit—and the wilderness that the Israelites wandered through between the Red Sea and the Promised Land in Canaan. It was not sandy but rocky—lots of big rocks all around. There were no trees, only a bunch of shrubby little bushes dotting what in a better mood you might call the "landscape." Here and there, I came upon some bones of a large animal that either died of thirst or were killed by an even larger animal. It doesn't take long in this kind of place before you start thinking about what you need to survive in this world, and what you don't need. I can't see spending four days in a wilderness like this, let alone forty days or forty years.

Remember how the first generation of Israelites out of Egypt started longing for the comforts of home. The Bible says "on the fifteenth day of the second month after they had left Egypt"—which is to say, it took them only around forty days before they started complaining, "We would rather be slaves and comfortable than be free and hungry!" When you are in the wilderness, stripped of the usual physical comforts, when you are stripped of all the social supports that may protect or hide you, what is left? How would you answer the questions: *Who am I? What is this life all about? What makes me live?*

When the Israelites emerge from the wilderness after forty years, they finally know who they are, where they have come from, how they got here, and who brought them here. They know that they are God's beloved people, and that it is by God's grace alone that they have survived. But as they are about to enter Canaan, the land of promise, God warns them that when they get settled happily in Canaan, they may forget their

experience in the wilderness that taught them that they depend completely on God's mercies and not on their own abilities or on their deservedness. "Remember," God says. "Remember who you are. You were a wandering Aramean, a nomad, and now you are the people of God. You were slaves in Egypt, and now you are inheritors of God's kingdom. Remember this always. It was not because you were better than everybody else that you are here, but because God in God's power and mercy saved you, brought you out of slavery, and gave you this land and this freedom and this bounty."

Life sometimes gives us wildernesses like this—places in our lives when we doubt ourselves, face an uncertain future, test ourselves and then find out who we are. But more often than not, we find a niche to settle in, a Canaan of our own. And then we are tempted to forget it is not our worthiness but God's forgiving love that saves us. Lent is a time for us to re-enter that wilderness in a deliberate way, a yearly reminder of our dependence on God.

So Lent is given to us by the Church as a kind of institutional wilderness, so to speak. On Ash Wednesday, as ashes were placed on our forehead, we were reminded: "Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return." In Lent, we are then invited to go deeper, deeper than dust, to the One who made us from dust.

We have the tools—the Ash Wednesday service invites us to self-examination and repentance, prayer, fasting, and self-denial, and reading and meditating on God's holy Word. This time is for us—with God. For forty days, we can wipe away the excesses of our days and find out what's left. This time of institutional wilderness, this Lenten season, is the time to find out who we are.

Now is the time to know in our bones that "one does not live by bread alone," as Jesus quoted Deuteronomy, but "by every word that comes from the mouth of God." Now is the time to find out that life is not all about me—life begins and ends with God. "Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return." But also remember, what's deeper than dust? It is God who created us out of the dust, and who created us out of love. Now is the time to remember that. When you are carrying a cross is not the time to figure out who you are and to figure out that you are in the loving arms of God. When you are carrying a cross and stumbling up that hill, you need to know deep in your bones. Are we wandering nomads—or the Bride of Christ? Are we orphans and slaves in Egypt—or are we sons and daughters of God? When that cross comes around, what we know will tell us how we will handle that cross.

May we always remember, we are dust, and to dust we shall return. But we are also God's beloved, and to God we shall return. I wish you a holy, life-giving, and God-filled Lent.