

A Sermon for the First Sunday in Lent, Year B
March 5, 2006 — Mark 1: 9–13
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We Are Pilgrims, Not Settlers!

The baptism of Jesus was an event that so impressed people, they had to tell others who had not been there. At first the story spread by word of mouth, but later it was memorialized in writing, and that's why we can read about it today. And the stories that were remembered, were those that could speak to people, from one generation to the next. The baptism of Jesus was one such story.

In fact, the day began as so many others had begun: people who had heard John preach, were coming to be baptized as a sign of their repentance. But on this particular day, a stranger appeared, seemingly out of nowhere, and asked to be baptized. While there was nothing out of the ordinary about his request, there was definitely something different about the man. At first, John refused to baptize him, but the man insisted. And afterwards, everyone seemed to agree, something happened. Some say a dove suddenly appeared, and hovered over the man; it was very strange to see a dove way out there in the desert. Others said that they heard a voice, speaking to the man from heaven; others, however, thought it was merely the sound of thunder. But even stranger was the fact that, after his baptism, the man quickly retreated deeper into the desert wilderness – almost as if he were being driven by some unseen force – and simply disappeared. And when it was all said and done, everyone agreed that there was something unsettling about the whole event.

“Don't get too comfortable; we aren't there yet.” This seems to be the message of today's gospel. Yes, this is God's beloved son, but he has things to do. His work was not completed with his baptism in the river; it had only begun. And Jesus couldn't afford to become too comfortable after his baptism, because he still had a long road ahead of him.

Over the centuries, people have wondered why Jesus had to be baptized. After all, if he was truly sinless, of what did he need to repent? The most satisfying answer I have heard, is that Jesus was baptized so that he could identify with us more closely, and so that we could identify with him.

When Jesus was baptized in the river, we went down into the water with him. When Jesus was driven into the wilderness, we were driven with him. When Jesus died on the Cross, we died with him. His life became our life. His mission became our mission. And just as he could not stay beside the river, enjoying the moments following his baptism, we cannot stay where we are. Don't get too comfortable, because we are not there yet!

But I'm always tempted to wonder: What's wrong with where we are? What's wrong with being comfortable? Is it so bad to have a nice home, a good job, a rhythm to life that provides me with a sense of security and stability? Is it a sin to be comfortable at church, and with the liturgy, and the people around me?

The short answer is “No.” But problems can occur, if we get so comfortable that we can no longer follow the path that allows us to identify ourselves with Jesus. That’s a problem, because the path that Jesus calls us to follow, is the path of pilgrims, and not the path of settlers. And sometimes, being a pilgrim means leaving that which is comfortable, and seeking something else. It may not mean literally moving from our homes, or quitting our jobs, or finding a new church. But it may mean searching for something of value beyond those things.

The Season of Lent is uncomfortable. It reminds us that we’re asked to take on certain things, or give them up. It reminds us that we’re asked to discipline our lives even more than we’re comfortable doing. It’s as if Lent is saying to us, “Don’t get too comfortable where you are, because there are a lot more miles left on your journey.” And Lent challenges us to view this life, this time, this place, as something we’re passing through, on our way to the home God has prepared for us.

There have been so many times in my life when I could have said “I have arrived!” and let things go at that, comfortable with what I had accomplished. For example, as a teenager, I made the conscious decision to turn my life around and follow Jesus. Later, after years of discernment and training, I was ordained to the priesthood. Later still, after spending nearly six years as the assistant rector of a parish in Texas, I received an invitation to become the rector of this parish. These were significant accomplishments for me. These were times when I could have said to myself, “I’ve done what’s needed to be done. I’ve accomplished what I set out to do. Now I can settle back and relax.” However, the Season of Lent challenges such thinking.

Even God, after he had finished creating the universe and everything in it, while resting on the seventh day, could easily have said, “Well, that’s that. It’s Miller time.” But he didn’t. He stayed with his creation. He stayed with us. He kept on working with us, and through us.

And we get a sense of God’s commitment to staying the course, in today’s reading from Genesis. There, he tells Noah that the rainbow is to be a sign and promise that he will never again destroy the things he has created, and no matter how far we may stray from him, he will always follow us, and love us, and guide and direct us.

And as much as the rainbow serves to remind God of the promises he made to us, it also serves to remind us that we are pilgrims, and not settlers. It reminds us that we can’t get too comfortable, because we haven’t arrived yet, and there’s still so much to do. There are still stories to be told, and children to nurture, and people to help, and goals to meet.

I’m told there’s a Bulgarian proverb that says: “God promises a safe landing but not a calm passage.” With that in mind, if we discover that our passage through this life is becoming too easy, too comfortable, perhaps that should be a sign that we’ve left the road of the pilgrim, and have staked a claim among the settlers. And if that’s the case, then we need to seek the grace of God’s Spirit to help us rejoin the path, and face the uncomfortable challenges of life, and see our journey through to the end.

Maya Angelou, in her book *Wouldn't Take Nothing for My Journey Now*, once wrote:

“Many things continue to amaze me, even well into the sixth decade of my life. I’m startled or taken aback when people walk up to me and tell me they are Christians. My first response is the question, ‘Already?’ It seems to me a lifelong endeavor to try to live the life of a Christian. [...] The idyllic condition cannot be arrived at and held on to eternally. It is in the search that one finds the ecstasy” (p. 73).

If the season of Lent tells us anything, and if today’s readings remind us of anything, it’s this: No matter how much we’ve accomplished, there’s still more to do. We’re pilgrims, and not settlers. But if you’re like me, happier as a settler than as a pilgrim, we can still take heart, because if the Christian life teaches us anything, it’s that there is as much joy in the journey as there is in the destination.