

Lent 1            Mark 1: 12-15

Lent has many themes: repentance, simplicity, discipleship, the meaning of suffering. Another might be movement. Going from one place to another, travel, journey, pilgrimage. We can picture this geographically: the Israelites leave Egypt. They move and muddle haphazardly through the wilderness for forty years until they enter the promised land. Or we can think about the great arc of salvation history: our first parents making the prototypical mistake representing our failures; the tragedy being corrected by Jesus as New Adam; his achievement allowing humans to move cosmically towards the new Jerusalem.

Or we can consider our own journey through life. We can evaluate how closely our lives conform to the humility and happiness of Jesus. We could map them to see how linear or circular or stagnant they seem. We can consider how we deal with new experience. Do we welcome it and use it constructively—as Jesus did in his arduous forty-day testing in the wilderness? Or, do we differ from his straightforward wrestling with his demons? Do we evade, avoid, and look for an escape route? Do we refuse the material that God is offering us to work with?

These are hard questions. They are summed up by the title of a great mural painted by Paul Gauguin. He entitled it, “Where do we come from? What are we? Where are we going?” These are profound and engaging questions to consider in the season of Lent. They are the questions Jesus must have dealt with for himself in his temptation period. Two of them, interestingly, come straight from the Bible. I wonder whether Gauguin knew this—he doesn’t seem like much of a Bible reader. Or did they just pop into his head from the great reservoir of human experience.

“Where have you come from? Where are you going?” The questions are asked by an angel in the obscure scriptural side-story of Hagar. She is the servant girl to Sarah, who encourages Hagar to bear Abraham’s child. But when the baby comes, Sarah resents Hagar and Ishmael. This is totally unfair, since Sarah came up with the idea initially. Hagar is cast out, and finds herself and the baby in the desert about to perish. God’s messenger appears, either internally or externally. He asks, “Where have you come from? Where are you going?” Hagar answers, “I am running away,” and (she might have added) am perfectly justified in doing so. The voice convinces her that this is not the solution; it is counter-productive and self-defeating. She must humble herself to go back. There she will learn the survival skills necessary for Ishmael to grow

up and fulfill a heroic destiny. Thus Hagar in an odd way exemplifies the difficulties and successes of following God's will. She shows how to navigate through when things seem unfair and difficult. We long for more details. Just as we are tantalized by the brevity of Jesus' temptation story. Both stories push us to find out for ourselves how to overcome the obstacles that arise.

Paul Gauguin overcame his obstacles by leaving the comfort and familiarity of middle-class France. He went as far as Tahiti to find new artistic inspiration. There he found paradise, in the colors, the simplicity, the beautiful women. Van Gogh was severely disappointed by Gauguin staying in Tahiti, when the two of them had planned to work together in France. Was his choice escapist or adventurous, avoidant or receptive? There are so many open questions about the mystery of a life. His great mural shows the questions, without giving final answers.

Where have we come from? There is a baby on one side of the mural, sleeping and blissfully unaware. He suggests that in order to grow, we have to wake up and feel the pain.

What are we? In the middle of the mural we see several life-giving activities. Two women walk arm-in-arm absorbed in earnest conversation. They are balanced by a solitary figure on the other side, walking alone but not isolated: she is a contemplative. In the middle a boy stretches as high as he can to pluck a mango from the tree. Does this represent forbidden fruit, or is it a healthy spiritual yearning which reaches for the ultimate? This seems more likely, as he immediately shares the juicy fruit with his little sister sitting nearby; he doesn't keep it for himself.

Where are we going? On the far side of the canvas an old woman is turning gray and rigid; the life-force is leaving her body. She is not alone; a loving granddaughter keeps vigil beside her. Although this seems to show the futility of life ending, Gauguin tantalizes us with some cryptic suggestions. Behind the woman is an indigenous idol. Gauguin shows this as a representation of divine mystery. Nearby is a white bird which we might recognize as Spirit, or flight, or joy. And the whole mural is set in a tropical paradise. What does this say about the world we live in, and the world we hope for?

In Lent we hear many stories, about our spiritual ancestors and our savior Jesus Christ. We remember Moses, leading his people out of slavery and into the promised land. We ponder Jesus' temptation, his transfiguration, his ministry, his suffering. We see his determined, intentional movement toward the cross. We learn that he did all this to enter our experience and transform it.

Lent, like life, is not an end in itself; it is an opportunity. It offers time to root and deepen; it pushes us toward the place we are meant to find. It offers the excitement and possibility of discovery. It allows us to ask questions, and test out answers. We can learn by making mistakes. I can't tell you what Lent should be for you. It is so many things. It is highly personal, uniquely individual, though we travel by the side of others. But I can remind you that, even in pain and difficulty, Lent moves you toward Easter. There we find that resurrection comes out of death. There we find Jesus' hand. Though his hand often seems absent, in actuality it is stretched out to greet, welcome, and help us step up to the next level.

Gabriel Myers, OSB