

March 1, 2009
First Sunday in Lent
by Pr. Michelle L. Miller

- Becki and Ethan made cookies this morning.
- Barbara is getting ready to celebrate Christmas (finally) with her family
- Thalassa's relationship status has changed.
- Greg is making a cosmo (again)

Status Updates. Lately, it's how I find out nearly all of my information about family and friends. Facebook, a social networking site with more than 175 million members, is transforming the way we communicate and connect with one another.

For those of you who have not yet signed on (Craig) or have no idea what I'm talking about, here's a little introduction. Facebook subscribers can share information, pictures, and notes with friends who are also on Facebook. You can post links to causes that are important to you, share a video, or participate in an on-line discussion of a presidential address while watching it on the computer screen.

But my favorite part of Facebook is the Status Updates. They are brief snippets of information that give me a glimpse into people's lives. The sentence starts with the person's name and then the person fills in the space after their name by briefly telling what he/she is thinking about or doing: Making lasagna, dreading jury duty, going to a concert, enjoying a quiet Saturday morning with family. But there is a limit to how much can be shared, because no more than roughly 30 words are allowed.

Sometimes scripture feels a bit like a status update. *Jesus came from Nazareth and was baptized; he was driven into the wilderness by the Spirit, tempted by Satan for 40 days, and then went to Galilee proclaiming good news.* (30 words)

Today's gospel text from Mark gives us very little information. It's fairly dry and matter-of-fact, and doesn't include many details as the other gospel writers do. But there's a lot going on between the lines; there's more to Jesus' life than the simple status update. Jesus' home and family are in Nazareth, but he's not. And this is during a time when people were expected to stay close to home, care for parents and start their own families. No, the decent thing for Jesus to do would have been to stay in Nazareth, marry and have children.

But he didn't do either of those things. Jesus left his home, abandoned his family and went on a spiritual quest. The journey begins with his baptism in the river Jordan; then immediately the Spirit drives him into the wilderness where he stays for 40 days, tempted by Satan, living among the wild beasts.

During the season of Lent we are invited into our own 40 days of wilderness time. Some will use these 40 days to "give something up for Lent." I've learned through people's status updates that this year they are giving up liquor, meat, T.V., chocolate and yes, even Facebook. But others have also shared their intent to *add* something: more time with family, volunteering at the pantry, daily prayer or yoga.

But Lent is more than a six week period of self improvement. Jesus' time in the wilderness was not tame or respectable, giving up a little bit here, but still enjoying all the comforts of home. He didn't just go out for a stroll or have a chance to pack the latest camping equipment from REI. Jesus was fully immersed in the wilderness, surrounded by wild beasts. Jesus was driven out into difficult days and places. He was tempted and tried beyond imagination.

Our wilderness may be that of addiction and substance abuse. It may be a jungle of depression and despair. Perhaps our wilderness is economic anxiety and fear. It may be the grief and pain of illness and chronic health struggles. Yes, wilderness takes on many forms, and it certainly doesn't happen only during the Lenten season. But it is in this season that we are invited to embrace the struggle, or at least acknowledge it before God and others. Maybe it's an opportunity to reflect on those times when we have journeyed to desert places, when the way seemed so desolate and when we most keenly felt what it meant to be alone. And maybe in the midst of it all we will discover that we are not.

Jesus enters the desert as a man who is discovering his baptismal identity. Still wet with baptismal water, Jesus hears the Spirit saying, “You are my Son, the beloved, with you I am well pleased.” Then immediately that same Spirit escorts him into the wilderness to figure it all out. Jesus has no family or friends there in the wilderness—only struggle, temptations, and trials. The text doesn’t say it, but in the midst of his wilderness suffering, I only can imagine that Jesus may have asked the age old human question, “Why me?” Perhaps he wondered, ‘What is this all about? What does this mean? How can it be that one minute I hear great shouts of affirmation and love and in the next I feel alone and abandoned?’

But I can also imagine that Jesus repeated under his breath the words he had heard from God in baptism, “You are my beloved. You are my beloved. You are my beloved. In you I am well pleased.” Repeating those words, remembering the moment, allowing that identity to seep into his very being, Jesus was reminded that he was not alone on this journey. The Spirit of God was with him—40 days, and beyond.

Jesus invites us to journey with him. He calls us to the font, and he calls us into ministry on his behalf. And in this thing called life, and this season called Lent, it often means a wilderness experience. But he also assures us we are not alone. I even know *that* because I’m on Facebook...

Because among all the seemingly insignificant details of peoples lives—what they had for breakfast or how they’re feeling at work that day—the people making those statements often post something deeper:

- Larry landed the perfect job
- Bill is headed for surgery and asks for your prayers.
- Robin is lighting a candle in memory of her brother.
- Sarah is expecting.
- Jacob is desperate for work.
- Michael is no longer married.

We are not alone in our struggles, our fears, or hopes or aspirations. We’re not gathered around a computer screen this morning (though I know from looking at Facebook today that some of you have already been there...☺) But we are gathered in this place, under the cross, with one another, around this simple wilderness meal of bread and wine. The dry font reminds us of the starkness of these 40 days—doing without, and going within. So we wait, secure in our baptismal identity, anticipating fresh water, spring promise, and a grand celebration for five people who will be baptized at the Great Vigil of Easter. And on that day, it will be more than a simple status update. It will be a celebration of a whole new identity in Christ and another great reminder of our life-long status: Beloved children of God.