

# Homily for the 1<sup>st</sup> Sunday of Lent

March 9-10, 2019

Readings: Deuteronomy 26: 4-10; Romans 10:8-13; Luke 4:1-13

Preacher: Susan Roll

Children love stories. So do adults for that matter. Ideas that would lie almost lifeless on a page or hang motionless in the air when written or spoken as discourse can come to life with vibrant color, dynamic action and flashes of striking insight when told as a story. A good story catches up its hearers and doesn't put them back down until the end. No wonder the Hebrew word for "word," *dabar*, also means "event." No wonder Jesus taught in parables.

The first reading for this Sunday, from Deuteronomy, includes the story text used during the Passover Seder, whose structure and rationale come from the biblical injunction, "And you shall tell your child on that day...."

At a certain point during the ritual of symbolic foods and actions, the youngest child present pipes up and says, "Why is this night different from all other nights?"—and cites four ways in which the meal differs. The leader of the Seder then begins to tell the story: "A wandering Aramean was my ancestor; [who] went down into Egypt and lived there as an alien, few in number, and there ... became a great nation, mighty and populous..." And as the story unfolds both children and adults are drawn in and come to identify with the Hebrew people, oppressed by slavery in Egypt, who were liberated by God and led by Moses into the desert to freedom.

The desert plays a different role in the Gospel reading for this Sunday, Luke's account of Jesus' temptations. This story is written in a dialogical manner, three provocations by a personified devil answered by three responses by Jesus to shut down the temptation. What is striking here is how it begins: "Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit into the wilderness." In neither case was the journey into the desert undertaken by choice; it was God (or the Holy Spirit) taking the initiative, calling a person or a people forth toward an unknown future, one that would lead to trials and terrors

before its conclusion.

And so, at the beginning of Lent, Christians are invited to enter some form of desert in their own lives, to take a hard look at the temptations that too often can pull them off course and out of touch with their better selves, and to summon the strength to say No to whatever is counterproductive, injurious to others, or flat-out evil.

In Lent 2002 the revelations of systemic cover-ups of sexual abuse of children by priests in the Boston Archdiocese had just come to light in the *Boston Globe*. In Lent 2019 Catholics across the world are left reeling from a seemingly endless round of witness accounts of childhood abuse and lifelong trauma, too often a cold or repressive response on the part of Church authorities, and a process of concealing and transferring abusive priests that bore similarities across very different countries and cultures. Were the clergy involved simply giving in to pernicious temptations—illicit and exploitative sexual desire, fear of besmirching the Church as an institution, a desire for promotion to higher ranks, or at least keeping shameful secrets hidden from view?

Deeper issues are coming to light: centuries of misogyny, fear of sexuality, lack of respect for the dignity of the body, treating the bodies of vulnerable persons as objects to be used for pleasure. It's as if the Spirit has led us into the desert once again, and the end is nowhere in sight.

What might happen, years from now, when the story is told of how ordinary Catholics grappled with the cascade of abuse revelations? How they showed compassion and offered acceptance and healing to the survivors of abuse; how they called the perpetrators to account; and most importantly, how they rebuilt the *ecclesia*, the Body of Christ, to reflect the powerful and transformative mystery of his incarnation, death and resurrection? We have the gift and the task, the crisis and the opportunity, before us. Righteous anger, properly channeled, can give energy to do the work of justice.

As we see in the Scripture for today, journeys through a desert do not inevitably end in the desert. And our belief in the resurrection tells us that what seems like

death does not inevitably end in perdition. The journey through the desert of Lent ends eventually, in the life that does not die, life for all and a living hope for the future.

