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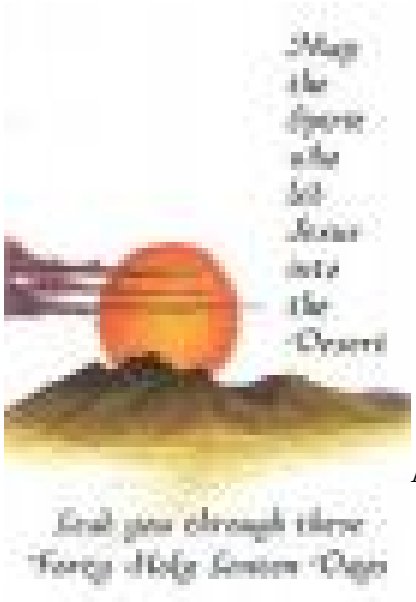
First Sunday of Lent

Ed Hays | Feb. 27, 2009

In today's gospel reading, Jesus, led by the Spirit of God, walks away from his work and responsibilities to take the desert cure (see **Mark 1:12-15** [1]). A Palestinian proverb in his day was "Physician, heal thyself," and by this withdrawal into the wilderness we might wonder if Jesus is seeking the healing of desert medicine.



Alone in the desolate wilderness inhabited by evil spirits and wild beasts, without food or water, and stripped of the security of his fellow villagers and companions, God alone becomes his sustenance! It appears that the desert purges Jesus of the infection of self-sufficiency; indeed, from that time onward God is the sole source of his strength. For Jesus, desert isolation is a soul pharmacy, as it forces him to confront his utter dependency on God. Independence comes only with adulthood and is a goal we work hard to reach. Yet independence can be like an eye infection, blinding us to the reality that even our every breath is dependent upon God, the source of all life.

Jesus began his teaching by saying: "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent and believe in the good news" (Mark 1:15). Good doctors take their own medicine. By going into the wilderness and purging himself of his family and village support system, Jesus learned to trust in God as a continuously caring, protecting, and loving parent. We proudly independent Americans find purging ourselves of independence painfully difficult and logically ask: "Isn't there an easier way?" The answer comes in the words of the former British prime minister, Margaret Thatcher, whose favorite response to her objectors was: "TINA," There Is No Alternative.

Lent is TINA time. There is no alternative to Jesus' requirements to repent ? to turn around -- and believe in the good news; that is, if you wish to be his disciple. Conversion is no brief 40-day exercise; it is a lifetime practice of returning/repenting that requires an ongoing bit-by-bit purging of anything in us that is not godly.

On this First Sunday of Lent, make a list of three pet self-set limitations or habits that you've developed that keep you from reaching higher. These growth boundaries mark how you've embraced or settled for who you are instead of seeing who you can become.

Lent is the season of becoming and of removing the restrictive boundaries that seriously limit our growth, the fullness of life, and the depth of our souls. On this desert Sunday, begin purging your pet limitations as well as those self-established boundaries you have placed on your prayer, patience, forgiveness, generosity and care of the poor.

-- from *The Lenten Pharmacy* by Fr. Ed Hays

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