

Gen. 9:8-17**Ps. 25:1-9****1 Pet. 3:18-22****Mk. 1:9-15**

Create in me a clean heart, O God,
and put a new and right (steadfast) spirit within me. *Amen*

Baptized. Tempted. Sent.

These are the three acts in today's gospel drama.

Baptism was the catalyst.

Proclamation was the result.

But the mystery unfolding, the challenge,

the testing before something changed,

when transformation took shape;

that was wedged somewhere in the middle,

and that's where our gaze is focused –

on The Vision Quest of Jesus.

The son of a friend recently completed "The Crucible"
at basic training in the process of becoming a Marine.

There was much prayer and hope for his success.

Crucible is defined as a situation of severe trial,

or in which different elements interact,

leading to the creation of something new.

At the very least, this year has been a severe trial,

leaving very few unscathed.

I dare say it has deepened and challenged
all aspects of our lives, *including* our faith.
Just like Jesus, we've faced beasts in the wilderness.

Mark's gospel doesn't specify,
whether the beasts were friendly or otherwise.
It just says he was "with the wild beasts." (v.13)
And the fact that he somehow survived
doesn't mean it was easy, or that they were peaceful,
or somehow, miraculously even caring for him.

Oh, no! I'm inclined to imagine
that if Satan had anything to do with it,
he was fighting for his life.

He was *starving*, by the accounts of Matthew and Luke.
His beasts were that of temptations to usurp God's power.
His temptations were desirable, to turn stones into bread.
Who wouldn't want to do that?

-to feed the hungry and starving peoples of the world,
-to feed yourself if you hadn't eaten for forty days,
a very long time indeed. Or what if...
you'd been surrounded by food scarcity your whole life,
wouldn't you be tempted-
to turn that rock into a loaf of bread?

The crucible, the vision quest, is a pivotal point between accepting or rejecting God's Vision and to discover how our lives intertwine with it.

Jesus saw, heard, *knew* His belovedness at His baptism. *And* as I've suggested before, it's not clear that Jesus understood the *magnitude* of His identity, the role he would play in the salvation of *all* people.

Paradoxically, we step *into* Lent, walking towards the cross with Christ as he steps *out of* the water, baptized and *set free* to discover Who He is meant to be.

On the other hand, we have just emerged from Ash Wednesday, not out of the water, but *out from the ashes*; perhaps feeling the unbearable weight of sin smudged across our foreheads, pressing our heads down low. And by the second definition of crucible, wherein different elements interact, leading to the creation of something new then the I would say the intersection of human and divine

fits the meaning perfectly.

What might that transformation look like?

The weight with which we bow our heads on Ash Wednesday is usually significantly heavy, threatening to buckle us at the knees.

But maybe not so much this year.

This year, Ash Wednesday was different.

Unlike any other I've known.

I observed a certain kind of joy; rejoicing at the encounter of one another on the corner of Main St., as we took turns marking the sign of the cross, mask covering mouth and nose, disposable q-tip as drawing tool, wastebasket and 'blaster' sanitizer at the ready.

The *assembly's* radiance was visibly and audibly evident – to be together incarnationally, to speak and hear words inviting us not to only remember our mortality and sin, but to also recognize and *accept* our divinity too.

Later that evening,
during the traditional Ash Wednesday liturgy,
we approached the imposition of ashes in an unexpected,
and definitely in a non-traditional way.

Each in our own sanctuaries, a *virtual* assembly,
where plain tap water, became by grace,
a means to signify Christ's claim upon us,
a cross of water – the cross of death and new life.

How appropriate then,
that we might even feel more united with Christ *this* Lent,
by discovering water as the vehicle this year
that leads us towards death and resurrection!

Might imposition of water be a more potent means
to identify with Christ in his temptation and suffering?

Forty days and Forty nights, the floodwaters raged.
Forty years the Israelites wandered in the desert.
Forty days and forty nights,
Jesus was in the wilderness with the beasts.
A sacramental gesture of grace invisible and unseen.

Karl Rahner wrote, “With the dust of the earth we trace on our foreheads the sign of the cross, so that *what we are in reality can be made perceptible in a sign: people of death, people of redemption.*”

(The Glenstal Book of Readings for the Seasons)

Rt. Rev. Steven Charleston, retired bishop in The Episcopal Church knows something of the transformative Vision Quest, and the intersection of diverse elements coming together. He describes in detail how his 30,000 year ancestral lineage in the Choctaw nation and his Christian faith collided while he was at seminary – where he later served as President and Dean until 2008 and where I began attending in 2010.

In his book *The Four Vision Quests of Jesus* (2015) he speaks of The Wilderness quest (as the need to enter into the ‘we’); Transfiguration as the 2nd quest (and the Native Theology of Transcendent Spirit); the 3rd quest of Gethsemane (of freedom through disciplines concerned with justice, compassion, and human dignity); arriving at Golgotha, the 4th quest (on kinship, balance, and harmony – the sacrament of sacrifice).

The conflict he experienced wasn't one of 'taking sides' but as he puts it, "My problem was strictly Spiritual... As any Native elder will tell you, everything grows from the Spirit. The Political, social, and economic parts of our lives are inextricably interwoven with our spiritual being."

(#13 of 191 Kindle edition).

He notes that in the same year of 1890; when the massacre at Wounded Knee transpired; Scottishman, James George Frazer wrote *The Golden Bough* – leading to generations of research in the field of Comparative Religion and Myth; two among the best known being Carl Jung and Joseph Campbell. The common thread underlying the *quest* in this field was the *question: How do human beings search for and obtain Spiritual Knowledge?*

The answer was interpreted and practiced in unlimited ways by cultures and societies across the globe.

But there became evident, a fundamental difference between Western ideology and Native American thought. In narratives reflected by Arthurian tales of the Holy Grail, religious specialists began to dominate the field, defining more and more narrowly who was qualified to embark on the 'vision quest'.

Not just anyone could perform a ‘true’ vision quest unless that one were of the caliber of Sir Galahad or Jesus.

But Bishop Charleston explains that in his Native Tradition, there’s a much more pragmatic purpose to the vision-quest; not so much a hero’s quest for an elusive prize; rather a process with the goal to produce transformation; *“a method for seeding back into community persons who understood both the spiritual nature of life and their role in it.”*

That sounds a lot like discipleship to me!

That sounds a lot like the baptismal process too.

And if God taps the insignificants of the world to accomplish God’s mission, then hardly the hero-quest will work for us.

Each of us stands to benefit from reflecting on the question: What does a vision-quest mean for me?

How does the idea of vision-quest guide me during Lent?

The basics of one’s vision-quest as outlined by Bishop Charleston includes:

- Intentional preparation (i.e. purification, prayer, disciplines like fasting, celibacy, etc.)
- Presence of others (communal support aspect – critical to the 3rd step)
- Challenge/Test (this is the 40 days in the wilderness)

- Lament – humbling oneself, opening up/vulnerability; crying out for divine nurture, God (parent/child) support

The entire quest is wrapped up in mystery. Maybe that's why the gospel of Mark offers few details.

It was a long time. Jesus was among the beasts. And the angels came and waited on him. Certainly, the above mentioned would apply to the vision-quest of Jesus.

It can apply to each one of us.

We could literally say that it will be 40 days, not counting the little feast days of Sunday.

We could identify and confront the beasts we fear.

We can ask for God's help.

Like discipleship, in the vision-quest, we enter into:

“A gradual, difficult, intentional effort to engage what we cannot buy, sell, define or control: mystery...

Without mystery there is no quest... The purpose of the quest is not to solve the mystery but to deepen it. The focus IS mystery, the process is mystery, the outcome is mystery.”-

Bp. Charleston

Haven't we all given up enough during a grueling year of loss and hardship imposed by a pandemic?

Couldn't we use a little more grace and mystery?

What if... take on a practice this year?

Can we stay with Jesus in His vision-quest?

What if, as a reminder, every day, each morning,
as we reach for toothbrush and washcloth,
take a moment to fill the basin or sink with water to say,
“it's a font.”

Dip your fingers into that bowl of water, and daily,
trace the cross of Christ across your brow.

A sacramental gesture that physically expresses
that crucible of divine and mortal.

Each day, remember *God with us. Us with God*,
bound together by the power of the Holy Spirit.

“Remember you are dust, and to dust you shall return”...

And “With you I am well pleased.”

Amen

Amma Susan+