March 1, 2015 Growing in Gratitude A Lenten Sermon by The Rev. John M. Barrett

INTRODUCTION TO LENT

As you may have noticed, the altar looks different today. The brass candleholders have been replaced by short wooden candlesticks. The open Bible has been replaced by a simple wooden cross. There are no flowers on either side of the altar. And the pulpit and lectern hangings and my stole have changed from white to purple.

What's going on?

This morning and for the next four Sundays we will be recognizing the Holy Season of Lent. Lent is the forty days, not counting Sundays, between Ash Wednesday, which was February 18th this year and Easter Day, which is April 5.

There are always forty days in Lent because shortly after being baptized, Jesus spent forty days and nights in the wilderness, where he fasted and was tempted by Satan to put food, power and pride before God.

During Lent some Christians "give up something " something that they normally enjoy, in unity with Jesus’ fasting and denying himself for forty days in the wilderness. In our West Center Protestant tradition, some of us try to do something different for Lent. Instead of giving something up, "we take something on," we take something on to honor our Lord and the forty days of Lent. But more about that later.

We are a week behind the traditional Lenten calendar because worship was cancelled on February 15th due to the heavy snow and 50 mph winds that were forecast. Last Sunday we celebrated the Transfiguration of Jesus, and today we are recognizing the First Sunday in Lent. We will catch up by celebrating the Third Sunday in Lent next week.

THE GOSPEL WITNESS Mark 1:9-15

Two sentences of the reading tell the story of Jesus in the wilderness. You will find more detailed accounts in the other Gospels.

SERMON

If you look at the cover of your worship bulletin, you will see a fresco in a church in Vienna, portraying Jesus defying Satan. Satan looks the worse for wear, under Jesus' foot. In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus says, "Get thee, behind me Satan," which Jesus may well be saying here. Two angels stand at the ready to wait on Jesus with devotion. The wild beasts, however, are nowhere to be found, not in the fresco, anyway.

In preparing for this sermon I learned something interesting about the wild beasts in the story of Jesus in the wilderness. I read this past week that the wild beasts were not a threat to Jesus. The early Church understood these animals differently than we might.

The animals who were with Jesus in the wilderness formed a “Peaceable Kingdom” as it were, the “Peaceable Kingdom” foretold by the prophet Isaiah in Chapter 11:6-9. The wolf shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid, and the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them. The cow and the bear shall feed; their young shall lie down together, and the lion shall eat straw like the ox.

American folk artist, Edward Hicks, a Philadelphia Quaker, painted sixty-one different versions of “The Peaceable Kingdom, starting about 1820. Some versions include William Penn and Native Americans, also living in peace.

Did you know that bears and lions lived in the wilderness in the time of Jesus? As top predators, they would normally have been a threat to any living thing entering their territory. These predators may have recognized Jesus as the Prince of Peace and followed his example.

As Jesus’ time in the wilderness drew to a close, I imagine that he felt grateful that the forty days were ending, grateful to God that the animals were his friends, grateful to God for the strength to overcome Satan’s evil promises of bread, wealth and power. I imagine that Jesus was also grateful to the angels who came and ministered unto him at the end of his forty-day trial.

Jesus had a lot to be grateful for, and Jesus showed his gratitude by the life he lived and the death he died.

And during this Lenten season, I am suggesting that we follow Jesus and become his disciples, not by fasting, nor giving up something that we enjoy. I am suggesting that we follow Jesus by being grateful and expressing our gratitude.

I am suggesting that during Lent we take on a discipline or a practice, if you will, that will enable us to grow in gratitude. During these forty days I like to turn self-denial and repentance upside down, making Lent a time of self-fulfillment and gratitude. This I believe is more in keeping with the spirit of our Lord who says in the Gospel of John, "I came that you might have life and have it abundantly." (John 10:10)

And so for this Lenten season I am suggesting that we focus on gratitude, thinking each day (or one day each week), what it is that we are grateful for at this moment in time.

If we are writers, we may want to keep a "gratitude journal," jotting down our blessings and elaborating on them each day. Or if writing seems a chore and would interrupt the flow of our thinking, we can hold what we are thankful for in the palm of our hand (in a manner of speaking), and then set it free, like a butterfly.

We may be thankful for sunlight on snow, the smell of coffee in the morning, a friend's listening to us, or the beauty of a favorite painting or piece of music.

We may be thankful to family and extended-family members for the little and big things that we share. We may smile at the kindness of strangers and thank them by following their example.

Well, you get the idea. I'm suggesting that we become a little bit like Emily in Thornton Wilder’s Our Town, Emily, who realizes how wonderful every moment of every day is, and only regrets that she didn't stop to notice and appreciate the wonder of life while she was alive.

I am suggesting that during Lent we stop and realize how much we have to be grateful for right now, today and every day --- through Easter and beyond.

And a key element of growing in gratitude is expressing our gratitude, sharing our gratitude rather than holding our gratitude captive.

We can express our gratitude to God for sunlight and coffee, friends and beauty by praying with our eyes closed or open.

We can tell, call or write the people we wish to thank. If we are grateful to a school or college, a museum or orchestra, we can send them a thank you note and possibly a contribution in support of their mission, a mission that has blessed our life.

Let's make Lent this year a time to grow in gratitude for what we have been given --- and a time to give grateful thanks in return.

On Friday I heard a story online, on AOL about gratitude and the expression of gratitude that made me smile. Here it is:

A homeless man in Colorado Springs is earning praise in his community and on the Internet after he helped push multiple stranded cars on an icy hill last weekend.

Drivers in Colorado are very experienced at driving in inclement weather, but the storm that hit Colorado Springs on Saturday gave even the seasoned drivers of the Rocky Mountain State a serious headache.

Twenty-three year old Shelby Hudgens was on the street corner watching cars get stuck on the icy hill. Hudgens had no warm home to go to. He had been living in his car with his dog and his few remaining possessions since his home burned down in November.

So Shelby Hudgens decided to help out. "I've been out here pushing cars for about the last three hours," he said. "They've been having trouble going up this hill – and right down at the very bottom they get stuck."

“If I was stuck I would want help, so I am just giving them the help I would want. It makes the world a better place.”

After a television news station came and spoke to Hudgens, and aired his story, people began finding ways to help the good Samaritan. One person who saw the report put Shelby Hudgens up in a hotel room, another offered him a job, and a [GoFundMe](http://www.gofundme.com/n182ww) page has so far raised over $5,500 in donations for him.

Hudgens later said, “No words can express my gratitude.”

Hudgens hopes to get a job at an assisted living facility and he dreams of becoming a certified medical assistant. He certainly has the caring qualities needed for a job in the medical field.

Shelby Hudgens was as surprised and grateful to his unexpected benefactors as the people that he helped were surprised and are grateful to him for his unexpected generosity. He helped others in order to make the world a better place, and now others are making the world a better place for him.

Hudgens helped people without a thought of personal gain. He didn’t say “I’ll give you a push for $50” or “What’s it worth if I give you a hand?” Hudgens just gave them a push; he gave them a hand, and they went on their way. And then he waited for someone else to come along who needed a hand. And he gave them what they needed too.

During this season of Lent may we think each day or each week about what we can give to others, and may we remember to find ways to express our gratitude for all that we have been given.

Amen.

HYMN OF RESPONSE Let All Things Now Living

Let All Things Now Living is usually sung at Thanksgiving, but it’s a beautiful, sprightly tune, with words that deserve to be sung all year long, especially today.