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The Journey Through the Desert

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The Journey Through the Desert

Rev. Annie Henninger

This sermon was preached on the 5th Sunday of Lent (A) and is based on my experience of a Fast with the traditional Ojibwe people on the White Earth Indian Reservation MN. I am presently the Priest-in-Charge of the Rosebud Episcopal Mission based in Gregory, South Dakota serving four small, primarily Native American churches on and near the Rosebud Reservation.

It is the beginning of the time of fasting. For four days you will be alone; you will neither eat nor drink. You will rely totally on the Spirit for spiritual sustenance. This time begins in the womb-darkness of the sweat lodge. Prayers are prayed, offerings are made, and one last sip of water is savored. The heat of the lodge purifies all those who have been chosen to enter into its darkness. The time of birthing into the spiritual world of the Fast is near. On your knees you crawl from the lodge. It is the birth canal into the spirit world in which you will live for the next four days, crying for a vision, hungering and thirsting for the Holy One.

We, like Nicodemus have come to Jesus in the night to inquire about the possibility of being born again. It is possible for a new birth to take place in our spirits. Nicodemus asks: "How can anyone be born after having grown old. Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?" It is the possibility of beginning over again that has led us to this fast.

Night and day become one. You wait alone in the sacred altar space, high on a hill or deep in the woods, for the Spirit to come and speak to you. You wait, you hunger and thirst, while loneliness and doubt fill you. But still you wait. What a journey this time of Lent has been! Five weeks and the journey quickly leads us to the Cross; then, on to resurrection. We have reached and passed the halfway point of our Lenten journey.

At the beginning of his ministry, newly-baptized by water and the Spirit, Jesus was driven into the desert to begin His forty day fast, His vision quest. He would be challenged by spirits who would try to lead Him away from his call from the Creator. Our fast began like that of Jesus; this Lent leaves us crying for a vision. We were signed with ashes at the beginning of our Lenten journey as are those who emerge from the sweat lodge to begin their fast, to announce to the spirit world that the fasting has begun.

Hunger and thirst are your companions in the wilderness. Our lives are focused on filling our stomachs and quenching our thirsts. Time alone on the Fast opens us to the deeper hungers and thirsts in our lives. That was the good news which Jesus tried to convey to the Samaritan woman at the well. He was offering her water that would quench the deepest thirsts of her spirit. He was offering her living water. Jesus said to the woman: "If you knew the gift of God and who it is that is saying to you, 'Give me a drink,' you would have asked him and he would have given you living water." This time of fasting allows us to trust that our thirst will be satis-

fied by God alone. It is possible to drink deeply from the well of living water. We are not alone as we cry for a vision. The hunger and thirst is real but we are being fed. It is possible, in the spirit world, to go without food and water for this time of fasting. The Holy One will be your food and drink.

Something happens as you fast and pray. You slow down. You begin to notice the smallest things around you. The silence seeps into your spirit and you allow creation to speak to you. The dragonflies keep you company. The night sky fills you with wonder. All of creation shouts of God's presence. You are like the man born blind, seeing the world for the very first time. He did not question the gift of sight that was given to him. He simply states the facts: "He put mud in my eyes. Then I washed and now I see." The Lenten journey is about learning to see in a new way.

You return from the Fast and now you see the world, your life, and yourself through new eyes.

This time of the Fast is a time both of death and rebirth. We go into our Lenten fast that we might be resurrected with Jesus when these forty days are finished. We journey to the grave with Jesus. Our hope is in the reality of the Resurrection. We are resurrected, not by the possibility of death but by living through the experience of it.

We know the story of the valley of dry bones. The Lord God speaks to those bones and gives them life. "Thus says the Lord God to these bones. I will cause breath to enter you and you shall live. I will lay sinews on you and will cause flesh to come upon you and cover you with skin, and put breath in you and you shall live." God will take our brokenness and re-configure us. God will breathe the breath of life into our old bones and make us a new creation. In our sinfulness we have become dismembered, our bones and spirits are scattered. Our time in the desert is meant to recreate and re-member us.

Lazarus knew what it was like to be re-membered, to be made new and restored to life. Jesus called Lazarus back from the grave in those most powerful words: "Lazarus come out," and to his friends "Unbind him and let him go." Lazarus came out from the tomb, his bindings flying in the breeze. He was free of those things in his life that kept him from fully responding to God's call.

This Lenten fast is a time for being freed from those things that separate us from God. At the beginning of this Lenten fast we were invited to lighten our loads and journey with Jesus, through the desert. Like Lazarus, we have been called forth from those things which bind us; like Nicodemus, from those things which blind us from seeing the hand of

God in all of creation; and like the woman at the well, from those things that neither feed us nor quench our thirst.

We will emerge from this Fast, this vision quest of ours, somehow freer, loosened from those things that bind us, re-introduced into a world that has newness about it. We will have been transformed by our time alone walking in the spirit

world. We will know a world which has been transformed by the Spirit.

You are finally led from the place of fasting to be purified once again in the sweat lodge. You are given food to eat and water to drink. You have cried out for a vision, a new way of seeing, and you have been transformed.

The Rev. Annie Henninger is a 1991 graduate of Saint John's School of Theology-Seminary. She served for five years immediately upon graduation as the Director of the Office of Worship for the Catholic diocese of Superior, WI. Her call as a priest has been to minister with the Native American Community and she has been richly blessed in her work. The liturgical formation she received at Saint John's has enriched her ministry and priesthood. She is the proud mother of six, all of whom were young children while she was at Saint John's and she is now an even prouder grandmother of 11.



Cruciform, Susan Forshey

Obsculta Prize

The following essay by Thomas Piolata of Saint Louis University is the winner of our inaugural *Obsculta* theological essay contest for college juniors and seniors. In addition to having his essay published, Mr. Piolata receives a **\$500 cash prize** and a **\$6,000 scholarship**.

The name of the prize, like this journal, is the opening word of *The Rule of Benedict*. The full phrase is: “Listen with the ear of your heart.” This simple admonition shapes not only the life of the monastic community at Saint John’s but also the way Saint John’s University School of Theology·Seminary seeks to do our theology and preparation for ministry. In a world where people too often speak first and ask questions later, we seek to listen—to listen for the voice of the Spirit in Scripture, tradition, each other, and the world. Out of this listening we speak that Word of God in a way we hope can be heard and even inspire the world in which we live.

The *Obsculta* prize is meant to encourage theological thinking, discussion, and writing in that spirit. We also hope it might encourage some of our best and brightest students to think seriously about vocations in theology or ministry.

Contest essays can be on any topic of Christian theology, including comparative studies of other religions and pastoral or practical theology, as well as disciplines such as Scripture, history, or systematics. If you know someone who might be eligible, perhaps one of your own students, encourage them to check it out.

Further information about the contest can be found at our website <http://www1.csbsju.edu/sot>.

William J. Cahoy, Dean
Saint John’s University School of Theology·Seminary



Stella Maris, Chris Calderone