

**A Sermon from the Episcopal Parish of
St. John the Evangelist in Hingham, Massachusetts**
Preached by the Rev. Timothy E. Schenck on February 21, 2010 (I Lent, Year C)

When I was a kid I would sometimes tag along with my father to symphony rehearsals. He was a conductor with the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra in the 1970s and so when a babysitter got sick or my mother was working, I'd accompany my dad to the old Lyric Theater in downtown Baltimore. When I wasn't hanging out in the dressing room with the poker-playing horn players or wandering around backstage among the huge double bass cases and assorted tympanis, I'd be out exploring the red velvet-lined boxes in the balcony. Looking back these were pretty special moments and I thought about them this Friday on the 19th anniversary of my father's death. He died of cancer at 52.

You could say that one of the soundtracks of my childhood was the tuning of the orchestra. If you've ever been to a classical music concert you know that they all start with the same ritual tuning. After a nod from the concertmaster, the principal oboe player gives them an A and then the rest of the orchestra tunes their instruments off of the oboe which, of all the instruments, provides the truest pitch. It just takes a few moments but they would always tune up at the beginning of the rehearsal and then periodically throughout their time together if my father heard something that didn't sound quite right.

The spiritual life is a bit like an orchestra in this regard. Over time instruments naturally get out of tune if left alone. Strings, in particular, are very sensitive to cold or humidity. A violin string might stretch out, causing it to go flat; or constrict, causing it to go sharp. And so a violinist must do a bit of fine-tuning with the pegs to get the instrument back in playing condition.

In a sense, the season of Lent is the church's tuning peg. As our priorities become slightly off key, Lent brings us back into tune; allowing us to again live in harmony with God. It's easy to let our spiritual lives get away from us. We get busy; we get self-absorbed; we get bogged down by endless activities. We let the minutia of life drive our priorities and suddenly we find ourselves out of tune with the Spirit. It might be subtle to the point that we hardly notice that our spiritual life has gone a bit flat. Or it might be strident, atonal disharmony. But either way, if we allow it, Lent holds the potential to bring our spiritual lives back into tune. It encourages self-reflection and a return to the basics of our faith.

The season of Lent itself is based upon Jesus' testing in the wilderness, a version of which we heard in this morning's gospel passage. Jesus is led by the Spirit into the wilderness or, as it says in Mark, he is "driven" out into the wilderness. And he remains there for 40 days which parallels both the 40-day season of Lent and the 40 years the Israelites spent wandering in the wilderness before entering the Promised Land. We're told that Jesus fasted during this time and that by the end he was "famished." This is the moment, at his very weakest, when the devil spies an opportunity to tempt him and draw him away from the work he has been called to do.

And isn't that usually the case? The devil or however you envision the force of evil that exists in the world waits for that opportune time to prey upon us. When we're depressed or anxious or scared or lonely. We may not always perceive it at the time but these are also the moments when Jesus himself is most fully present in our lives. That's what Jesus' testing in the wilderness

demonstrates: that we worship a God who is not remote or distant but fully aware of the human struggles we all encounter.

I think this helps answer that nagging question that has stumped countless preachers and Sunday School teachers over the years: Why exactly did Jesus need to be tested in the wilderness? Why would God need to test his own son? And at first glance it does look like some sort of cruel fraternity hazing ritual. But Jesus isn't pledging the Chi Rho house. I think it was neither for Jesus nor God but for us. To show us that the Incarnate God was both fully human and fully divine. Jesus understands human suffering and pain and temptation even as he alone withstands it. The author of the Letter to the Hebrews puts it this way, "For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin." And in this sense the period Jesus spent in the wilderness was a heroic act of love. One that foreshadows the ultimate loving act that occurs upon the cross.

It also demonstrates the perfect obedience to God demanded of Christians. As Jesus says in response to the devil's offer of all the kingdoms of the world, "Worship the Lord your God and serve him only." Obedience is a Christian virtue that rubs against the modern American notion of freedom. We tend to look upon obedience as fine for dogs or perhaps monks, but not us. We like to do what we want, when we want, how we want. It's the American Way.

The spiritual writer Richard Foster has written that "In the spiritual life only one thing produces genuine joy and that is obedience." Which seems counter-intuitive. We generally don't like being told what to do. At my house it's often the cause of loud and drawn-out struggles; especially when I make unreasonable demands like asking my boys to brush their teeth or put on socks. But Foster makes a distinction between being told what to do and engaging in "holy obedience" which is joyful.

And it's joyful because in the Christian life obedience to God is not about being burdened with demands or tied up in emotional bondage. Obedience leads to freedom. Obedience gives us the freedom to live a fruitful life; the freedom to let go of the small issues that drain our time and energy in order to focus upon what really matters. Obedience doesn't subvert our wills; rather it gives us the freedom to be the people God has called us to be. Just as Christ's obedience to the will of his Father allowed him to fully engage his calling as God's son.

So through faith in Jesus Christ we are drawn into a joyful obedience. And, yes, joy is allowed during Lent. For those of you who grew up in liturgical traditions, joy may not be what immediately comes to mind when you think of this season. Many associate Lent with a church-sponsored period of depression. A time when we're supposed to walk around looking grim, eating twigs, and dwelling on our shortcomings; a season to get over with so we can get on to Easter. But I have a confession to make: I like Lent. How could you *not* be excited about a time specifically set aside to get closer to God; to engage the broad questions of life and faith? That's good stuff. And it's why I don't see Lent so much as a time for self-flagellation as it is a time of joyful obedience.

This Lent, I encourage you to allow your spiritual tuning peg to be turned, if even just slightly. It takes a touch of obedience to the ultimate conductor of our lives. But ever-increasing peace, joy, love, and harmony beckon.