

Lent 1
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Pr. Michelle L. Miller

Lindsey. Shaun. Apolo. Bode. I see some of you already know who I'm talking about. If you're like me, you watched these and other Olympic athletes march in 10 days ago with little knowledge of who they were, and now they're household names. When they come in behind the flag at the closing ceremony, you'll be able to match names with faces, theirs and other faces with their country flags. Their identities will be clearer.

NBC is doing its best to give us the stories behind the faces; because, of course, they're not just athletes who have trained for years. They're citizens of countries. And they're sons and daughters, students and working professionals. These athletes are connected to others and their identities are intertwined. In their faces we see proud parents shedding tears of joy or weeping in disappointment. We see worried faces of fans and friends as a skier or snowboarder wipes out and injures his or her body. And we've seen faces of deep sorrow in the country of Georgia where, this weekend, they buried their native son Nodar, Olympic hopeful in the luge.

As I look at your faces I see a variety of identities too. I'm not sure of your skills in winter sports, but I know you, too, are sons and daughters, sisters, brothers, parents or grandparents. You wear many hats and have a variety of identities. Student, teacher, mentor... Job-seeker, working professional, or retired... partnered or single... artist, athlete, writer, baker. You see, once we start to name or think about all that identifies who we are, the options are endless.

In this week's gospel reading Jesus is not necessarily in an identity crisis, but he is being tested on his identity. Just prior to this temptation scene in the wilderness, Jesus was baptized. At his baptism the Holy Spirit descends on him and declares that Jesus is God's beloved son. The scene in the wilderness (that we read today) happens between Jesus' baptism and his ministry, between being identified as God's chosen one and being sent out to do God's work. Identity and mission; and in the middle of these two, Jesus enters 40 days of training during which he's tempted by Satan who quotes scripture, taunts and tempts Jesus with promises of a brighter future: Don't settle for the bronze or silver, Jesus, because if you do these things you can have the gold.

But when a hungry Jesus is told to turn stones to bread he has his own answer from scripture, "It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone.'" When he's told he could have all the kingdoms bow down and worship him, Jesus replies, "It is written, 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.'" Then when Satan suggests Jesus throw himself off the temple because surely the angels will save him, Jesus is firm in his response: "It is said, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'"

Scripture, spirit, simplicity. It is no accident that this reading comes as we enter Lent, our time of training, of testing. Lent is a time to strip away the many identities heaped upon us and focus fully on our main identity as child of God.

Yesterday when I should have been working on this sermon but was instead listening to "Wait, Wait Don't Tell Me on NPR," I heard Ashley Judd talk about her life as an actress turned student. She said, "Acting is what I do; it's not who I am." What a good Lenten reminder for us. We have countless things we have to do, expectations to fulfill, titles to live up to. But in Lent, in this time the ancient church used as preparation for baptism, we are reminded we are nothing more, and nothing less, than child of God, baptized and beloved. That is who we are.

Just a few days ago we had ashes smeared onto our foreheads to remind us of our mortality, to plunge us into this time of training, a wilderness period of 40 days to reflect on how our identity as the baptized informs our mission...informs all of our identities/roles we are expected to fulfill.

Author and priest Barbara Brown Taylor wrote an article about this wilderness time we call Lent. She writes, "Do not bother looking for (the word) Lent in your Bible dictionary. There was no such thing in biblical times... the custom of spending 40 days in prayer and self-denial did not arise until later, when the initial rush of Christian adrenaline was over and believers had gotten very ho-hum about their faith.

So the early church announced a season of Lent, from the old English word Lenten, meaning ‘spring.’—not only a reference to the season before Easter, but also an invitation to a springtime for the soul. Forty days to cleanse the system and open the eyes to what remains when all comfort is gone. Forty days to remember what it is like to live by the grace of God alone and not by what we can supply for ourselves.”

Lent calls us away from instant gratification we’ve grown accustomed to. Israel spent 40 years in the wilderness learning to trust the Lord. Elijah spent 40 days in the wilderness before hearing the still, small voice of God on the same mountain where Moses spent 40 days listening to God give the law. Jesus spends 40 days being tested and tempted. It was hard. It was awful. It was necessary. The season of Lent gives us a time, a space, a community that gets us to slow down, to pay attention to the spirit, to examine our baptismal identity and remember what it’s like to live, as Barbara Brown Taylor says: “by the grace of God alone.”

By God’s grace we *will* be renewed in our baptismal identity- to love boldly, give thanks and rejoice, weep with those who are hurting, and tend to the poor, the sick, and the outcast. No matter what our varied identities are: mother, friend, nurse, student, athlete, (whatever you name and claim for yourself) all of these are intertwined with our primary identity as one who is marked with the cross of Christ forever. We live our lives dripping wet with the grace of the Holy One who is with us in our temptations, in our joys and sorrows, in our celebrating and our disappointments, in our highest hopes and deepest fears, and in all our days.

We live in a place and at a time that’s characterized by instant gratification: a machine that gives us cash instantly, another that cooks our food in a matter of minutes, and phone key pads that make it possible for us to send messages to one another in an instant—even half-way around the world.