

We Are Pilgrims, Not Settlers!

The baptism of Jesus was an event that so impressed the people who were there, that they *had* to tell others about it. And so, and at first, the story spread by word of mouth. But later it was memorialized in writing, and that's why we can read about it today. And the stories about Jesus that *were* remembered, were those that could speak to people from one generation to the next. And apparently, the baptism of Jesus was one such story.

That day began as so many others had begun: people who had heard John preach were coming to be baptized by him as a sign of their repentance. But on that particular day, a stranger appeared, seemingly out of nowhere, asking to be baptized.

While there was nothing out of the ordinary about his request, there was definitely something out of the ordinary about the man. At first, John refused to baptize him, but the man insisted and John relented.

And afterwards? Well, everyone seemed to agree that *something* had happened. Some say a dove appeared out of nowhere, and hovered over the man. And wasn't it strange to see a dove way out there in the desert? Others said that they heard a voice coming from the heavens, speaking to the man. Others, however, thought it was merely the sound of thunder.

But stranger still was the fact that, after his baptism, the man quickly retreated even deeper into the desert wilderness — almost as if he had been driven by some unseen force — and he simply disappeared.

And when it was all said and done, everyone agreed that there was something unsettling about the whole event.

“Don't get too comfortable; we aren't there yet.” This seems to be the message of today's gospel. Yes, this is God's beloved son, but he still has things to do. His work was not completed with his baptism in the river; it had only begun. And Jesus couldn't afford to become too comfortable after his baptism, because he still had a long row to hoe.

Over the centuries, people have wondered why Jesus had to be baptized. After all, if he was truly sinless, of what did he need to repent? One of the more satisfying answers that I've heard is that Jesus was baptized so that he could identify with us more closely, and perhaps more importantly, so that we could identify with him. In other words,

When Jesus was baptized in the river, we went down into the water with him.

When Jesus was driven into the wilderness, we were driven with him.

When Jesus died on the Cross, we died with him.

His life became our life. His mission became our mission. And just as Jesus could not stay beside the river, enjoying the moments following his baptism, we cannot stay where we are. "Don't get too comfortable, because we are not there yet!"

But I'm always tempted to wonder: What's wrong with where we are? What's wrong with being comfortable? Is it so bad to have a nice home, a good job, a rhythm to life that provides me with a sense of security and stability? Is it wrong to be comfortable at church, and with our liturgy, and with familiar people around me?

The short answer is "No." But problems can arise if we get so comfortable that we can no longer follow the path that allows us to *continue* to identify ourselves with Jesus. And that's a problem, because — and here's the thing — the path that Jesus calls us to follow, is the path of *pilgrims*, and not the path of *settlers*. And sometimes, being a pilgrim means leaving that which is familiar and comfortable, and seeking after something else. It may not mean *literally* moving from our homes, or quitting our jobs, or finding a new church. But it *may* mean searching for something of value beyond those things.

And that's why the Season of Lent can be so uncomfortable. It reminds us that we're asked to take on certain things, or give them up. It reminds us that we're asked to discipline our lives even perhaps even more than we feel comfortable doing. It's as if *Lent* is saying to us, "Don't get too comfortable where you are, because there are a lot more miles left on your journey." And Lent challenges us to view this life, this time, this place, as something *we're passing through*, on our way to a destination which God has already prepared for us.

Looking back over the course of my life, there have been so many times when I could have said “I have arrived!” and let things go at that, comfortable with what I had accomplished. For example,

As a young teenager, I made the conscious decision to turn my life around and follow Jesus.

Later, after years of discernment, education, and training, I was ordained to the priesthood.

Later still, after spending nearly six years as the *assistant* rector of a parish in Texas, I received an invitation to become the rector of a parish in Kansas.

Those were significant milestones in my life. Those were times when I could have said to myself, “I’ve done what’s needed to be done. I’ve accomplished what I set out to do. Now I can settle back and relax.” However, the Season of Lent challenges such thinking.

After all, when he had finished creating the universe and everything in it, and while he was resting on the seventh day, God could easily have said, “Well, that’s that. ‘It’s Miller time.’” But he didn’t. He stayed with his creation. He stayed with us. He kept on working with us, and through us, and for us.

And we get a sense of God’s commitment to staying the course in today’s reading from Genesis. There, he tells Noah that the rainbow is to be a sign and promise that he will never again destroy the things he has created, and no matter how far we may stray from him, he will always follow us, and love us, and guide and direct us.

And as much as the rainbow serves to remind God of the promises he made to us, it also serves to remind us that we are pilgrims, and not settlers. It reminds us that we can’t get too comfortable, because we haven’t arrived yet, and there’s still so much to do. There are still stories to be told, and children to nurture, and people to help, and goals to meet.

I’m told there’s a Bulgarian proverb that says:

“God promises a safe landing but not a calm passage.”

Well, with that in mind, if we discover that our passage through this life is becoming too easy, too comfortable, perhaps that should be a sign that we've left the path of the pilgrim, and have staked a claim among the settlers. And if that's the case, then we need to seek the grace of God's Spirit to help us rejoin the path, and re-face the uncomfortable challenges of life, and see our journey through to the end.

Maya Angelou, in her book entitled *Wouldn't Take Nothing for My Journey Now*, once wrote:

“Many things continue to amaze me, even well into the sixth decade of my life. I'm startled or taken aback when people walk up to me and tell me they are Christians. My first response is the question, 'Already?' It seems to me a lifelong endeavor to try to live the life of a Christian. [...] Th[at] idyllic condition cannot be arrived at and held on to eternally. It is in the search that one finds the ecstasy” (p. 73).

If the season of Lent tells us anything, and if today's readings remind us of anything, it's this: No matter how much we've accomplished, there's still more to do. We're pilgrims, and not settlers. But if you're like me, and happy to be a settler, we can still take heart, because if the Christian life teaches us anything, it's that there is as much joy in the journey, if not more, as there is in the destination.

Let us pray: Direct us, O Lord, in all our doings with your most gracious favor, and further us with your continual help; that in all our works begun, continued, and ended in you, we may glorify your holy Name, and finally, by your mercy, obtain everlasting life; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.