

# Community of Christ

## Fairbanks Branch Happenings

### February 10, 2005

The theme for this Sunday is “Find God in the Wilderness!”

Footsteps lead us  
Into a wilderness  
Necessary for growth for learning,  
Deciphering His charge to us and finding and knowing Him.

Yesterday we embarked on the 40 day journey of Lent and entered into a period of seeking, searching and preparation for Easter season. A spiritual wilderness where we retreat, are tempted, adjust our attitudes, test our faith and learn that we are not alone.

Ash Wednesday marks the beginning of the Lenten season and whereas before it was mainly observed by the Catholic faith, over the last several years it has been observed by many faiths. On Ash Wednesday, the faithful gather at the church and celebrate in a service – Mass for the Catholics and a special church service for other denominations. During the service, the celebrant places the sign of the cross on the foreheads of the faithful and asks them to turn away from sin and accept the way of the Jesus Christ.

Below is a reflection sent that was sent yesterday by Edith Gallaher who is a high priest and World Church Spiritual Life Minister from the Chesapeake Bay Mission Center.

It is Ash Wednesday, the beginning of the Lenten season, the 40 days leading up to the Holy week of Easter. I invite you to join me in daily reflections. As always the delete button is available for use. What you will find here is a combination of my own thoughts and those of a friend who is sharing her Lenten thoughts with me.

May you be richly blessed as we journey together.  
Edith

Why ashes? (And did you know that the ashes used are most often from the palm branches from the year before?) This question took me to my bible dictionary, my wonderful \$5.98 find at the Half Price bookstore. Ashes are referred to in scripture for many reasons; a sign of shame, grief, of fasting, abasement before God, etc. What caught my eye was that ashes from a special sacrifice were combined with water for a ritual cleansing. Perhaps that is what today is about, as we begin our 40 day journey, to be cleansed, humbled, emptied in order to be filled. But not in a sad sort of way. More like in an expectant way, looking forward to what the journey will bring to us.

Psalms 51: 10-12

Create in me a clean heart, Oh God,  
and renew a right spirit within me.  
Do not cast me from your presence  
or take your Holy Spirit from me.  
Restore to me the joy of your salvation  
and grant me a willing spirit to, sustain me.

What is your wilderness? Are you tempted to soften the cost of discipleship? Will you choose to remain in the wilderness or come out of the wilderness with a clearer vision and commitment to do His will?

The following is quite long but hopefully worth the read. It was written by Michael D. Guinan, O.F.M., a professor of Old Testament, Semitic languages and biblical spirituality at the Franciscan School of Theology in Berkeley, California. Hopefully you will read it and reflect on it. As Edith Gallaher stated, the delete button is available. Or you can skip to the announcements.

When we think of Lent, we think of spring. That's because *Lent* comes from a German word for "springtime." In many other languages (e.g., Spanish: *Cuaresma*), the name for the season before Easter is derived from the Latin word for "40," a clue that something else important is happening, something that our Scripture talks about. The 40 days of Lent recall the 40 days of Jesus' being tempted in the wilderness (Mt 4:1-11; Mk 1:12-13; Lk 4:1-13). But when we look at the Gospel accounts of Jesus' temptations, always read on the first Sunday of Lent, we see that they in turn direct us further. Jesus' temptations recall the 40 years of Israel's temptation in the wilderness on their journey to the Promised Land.

## **Wilderness**

Since the "time" of the wandering is more or less symbolic, what about the place? Israel certainly knew the real wilderness, since that would describe fairly well the regions to the south, southwest and east across the Jordan. The desert is a place of no water and no food since little vegetation can grow there. It is also the abode of dangerous animals. The desert is a place of extremes where choices are more clear-cut.

The wilderness also could carry symbolic meaning. In the religion of Canaan, a special god named Mot (a word that can also mean "death") was in charge of the hot, dry, barren place, the wilderness, and of the hot, dry, barren time, the summer. Rain ceases; vegetation dries up and dies. The wilderness is a negative place where the power of Death/Mot holds sway, where basic questions have to be dealt with. In the Gospels, Jesus is tempted in the wilderness to be a different kind of Messiah; to take the path of spectacle and power rather than that of humble service, but this temptation would continue throughout his ministry up to his death itself when he is taunted to come down off the cross.

Many spiritual writers today speak of a "wilderness experience." This is a kind of retreat experience, time set apart to focus on, to ask, to consider, to respond to basic questions of the spiritual life. It need not be, and often is not, a literal "desert place," though that is not impossible. Lent is the Church's annual "wilderness experience," its retreat to ask again the basic questions.

## **Time of journey**

Israel's time in the wilderness was not simply a time of aimless wandering, of pointless movement. They were on a journey with a beginning in Egypt and an end in the plains of Moab as they are about to enter the promised land of Canaan. It progresses in orderly stages, from Egypt to Sinai, where they stay almost a year, and then from there to Moab.

Two temptations against the journey recur and have to be dealt with. The first is the temptation simply to stop the journey, to settle down, to say, "That's enough! Let's stay here." There were periodic resting places along the way, for example, at the oasis of Kadesh Barnea (Nm 13:26; 20:1), but the time comes to get moving again, and they do this "at the bidding of the Lord" (Nm 9:17-18; 10:11-13). In the Book of Deuteronomy, Moses recalls the departure from Sinai: God says, "You have stayed long enough at this mountain....Leave here..." (Dt 1:6-7). The community is forbidden to settle down too long. A similar theme can be noted in the Gospel accounts of Jesus' transfiguration (the reading for the second Sunday of Lent). "It is good that you are here. If you wish, I will make three tents" (Mt 17:4). But they come down

from the mountain. Could this be a temptation we face in our Christian lives? The God of the Bible is a God who calls us continually out of secure and comfortable presents into unknown and risky futures.

In some ways, the second temptation is even worse. "And they complained to Moses...Why did you bring us out of Egypt?" (Ex 14:11). They do not want to stop the journey; they want to reverse it. They want to go back. Even though they have seen all the signs and wonders God has worked on their behalf, they wish these had not happened. They want to go back to Egypt!

The second temptation is idolatrous, seductive (especially for religious people) and very common. It is nostalgia for the past. The past looks more attractive, more secure, safer. As well it ought! We have already been there; it holds no surprises. What makes the past so attractive is precisely the fact that it is past, and preferably not too recent. Nostalgia depends on distance and selective amnesia. We are indeed supposed to remember the past; this is absolutely essential. But when we do this, we bring the past into the present in order to help us live into the future. In nostalgia, on the other hand, we want to bring the present into the past in order to avoid the future.

How often this is justified by an appeal to the Bible! "Back to the Bible," we hear, "back to the Bible!" Do we ever hear, "Forward to the Bible?" When we go back to the Bible, what we find there is a God who is always out ahead of us, calling us into the unknown, into the future. Could this be a temptation we face on the journey of our Christian lives?

We have looked at several general aspects of Israel's wilderness experience. We now look more closely at exactly what happened in the wilderness. It is a place of covenant, of testing and of presence.

## **Place of covenant**

The main thing that happened to Israel in the wilderness was their covenant with Yahweh at Mt. Sinai. But we can ask first, "Why could God not have led Israel directly from the sea-crossing into Canaan?" This was the ultimate goal, but there was an intermediate goal of primary importance. Moses had said repeatedly to Pharaoh, "The Lord, the God of the Hebrews, sent me to you with the message: 'Let my people go, to worship me in the desert'" (Ex 7:16). Yahweh's people come to Sinai to learn to worship Yahweh.

But perhaps we can go a bit deeper. In a situation of oppression, a twofold problem exists: Some people are oppressed because others are oppressors. History eloquently attests that most often, when a people are freed from oppression, they quickly become oppressors in turn. The victims of today become the oppressors of tomorrow. The problem is that both share a common set of values; they agree on the basic issues, but disagree on the present arrangement of things. The chain of oppression goes on.

If the Israelites, newly freed from oppression in Egypt, were to go directly into Canaan and assume power there, why would they be any different? Instead of Canaan, they come to Sinai for an extended period of "attitude adjustment." Covenant with Yahweh, the God who frees from oppression, calls them to a whole different view of reality, a new set of values and a totally different style of life. To live the covenant truly is to worship this God and to be concerned for the rights and needs of others. The only way to break the chain is to become a servant of Yahweh.

During his temptations in the wilderness, Jesus is also tempted to live by a set of values totally different from those of the Father. Will he be the kind of Messiah that God was calling him to

be, or would he go the more culturally acceptable way of power, prestige and spectacle? We know the answer.

During Lent we examine our lives in the light of our sharing in the covenant of Christ. We too are called to a view of reality and a set of values quite different from those of the culture(s) around us. Do we really embody them in our lives?

## **Place of testing**

The wilderness was also the place where Israel was tested in its faithfulness to Yahweh and where it repeatedly failed. What is it that tests the Israelites' faith? They have nothing to drink; God provides them with wonderful water from the rock (Ex 17:2-7). They have no food; God sends them manna (Ex 16). They are threatened by enemies from without, the Egyptians first, then the Amalekites (Ex 17:8-15); later they will face others (Nm 21:1-3; 21-35; 25:16-18). In addition to this, there are internal struggles for power. Disputes center especially on the leadership of Moses and Aaron (Nm 12:1-16; 14:1-4; 16:1-35).

The wilderness is a place of extremes, and choices are more clear-cut. Food and water are essential for physical survival. Security from external threat and internal stability are essential for social survival. These are legitimate needs, but in the wilderness, they become temptations for Israel's faith: Will they maintain their faith in the God who brought them safely from Egypt and who guides them in the wilderness? They often failed. They could not unlearn so quickly and easily all the old values of their previous way of life.

Jesus, in the wilderness, was also tempted about food; unlike Israel, he kept his faith in God. What of us? As strongly as we may say that we want—and really intend—to follow God, many forces remain, within and without, to pull us away and push us toward idols. It is always the most legitimate needs (e.g., food, water, defense, internal order) which can become the most seductive idols. Is our service of God the true foundation of our life?

## **Place of presence**

The wilderness was a place of threats to life and of death. The Israelites are tested to see if, in fact, they will truly believe that their God, a God of life, is with them there.

At the beginning of their exodus, God had called to Moses from the burning bush and sent him to lead the people out of Egypt. Moses replied, "When I go to the Israelites and say to them, 'The God of your fathers has sent me to you,' if they ask me, 'What is his name?' what am I to tell them?" God replied, "I am who I am" (Ex 3:13-14). God's enigmatic answer implies that "I am with you/I am present to/for you" (see Ex 3:12, 16-17).

In addition to the assurance of God's presence, reflected in the "name," there were more tangible signs of God's presence: the Ark and the Tent. The Tent was a portable shrine that could be carried with them on their journey; the Ark, a portable throne for God, was kept in the Tent. These were visible reminders of the continuing presence of God in the midst of the people. Whether encamped or on the march, they should not be afraid because Yahweh was with them.

Jesus never wavered in his close relationship to God. We Christians are assured that Jesus indeed is "God with us" (Emmanuel, Mt 1:23), and he has assured us, "And behold, I am with you always, until the end of the age" (Mt 28:20). In the midst of our struggles, temptations, journeys, do we really believe that God is with us? The wilderness is a place to nurture our belief that God is truly with us.

During the 40 days of Lent, we share with the whole Church an annual "wilderness experience." The questions and issues we face are basically the same as those we have seen in the Old

Testament and in the New. They are themes ripe for our Lenten practice, themes around which we can organize our traditional Lenten practices of prayer, fasting and almsgiving.

The Bible bears witness that it is all right not to know the details of the future. We do know the most important thing about it: We are not alone; "God is with us!" The words addressed first to Israel speak to us as well: "Do not be afraid, for I am with you" (see Gn 28:15; Ex 3:12). Whatever the future brings, we will make it together; we will persevere even through death itself. Lent, after all, looks forward to Easter!

**February 12<sup>th</sup> – Deadline** to RSVP to Joanne Chapman if you are planning on attending the 125<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebration for Hearne on February 20<sup>th</sup>. The caterer needs a count!! Don't wait til the last minute!!!!

**Saturday, February 12<sup>th</sup> - 6:30 p.m. – V-Day Dinner** – Please plan on joining us for dinner. Jeff Whitehall Jr. has volunteered the gents to cook dinner for us!!!! So gents, please see Jeff and get your assignment!!! The menu will consist of spaghetti, bread, salad, dessert, tea and coffee. Jeff needs helpers to set up, cook, clean up etc. Set up will start about 3:00 at the church. Steve Herald will be providing a program for that evening. The meal will cost \$8.00 per adult and \$2.50 per child. **Please pay in advance and before February 6<sup>th</sup>**. Note on your check that it is for the V-Day dinner and give your check to Margie White or Martha Romig. Also, let Margie know if you need babysitting. Come and enjoy – Avoid the crowded restaurants and long wait times!!!!

**Sunday, February 20<sup>th</sup>** – Hearne 125<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebration. Ken Robinson from First Presidency is the guest speaker.

**Sunday, March 13<sup>th</sup>** – 10:30 a.m.- Congregational Conference Election of Congregational Delegates to Special Mission Center Conference for election of World Conference Delegates. (Please let John know if you're interested in serving as a delegate from our congregation to the Mission Center Conference in April.)

**Saturday, April 2<sup>nd</sup>** - Special Mission Center Conference to elect World Conference Delegates - Pasadena - 1:00- 3:00 p.m. (Persons interested in serving as a World Conference Delegate or as a World Conference Alternate should contact Mark Euritt so that he can place their name on the ballot.)

**June 2-5<sup>th</sup>** - Community of Christ Special World Conference - Independence, MO

The worship and nursery schedules have been posted in the family center for January through March, 2005. Please check these .

Nursery Schedule:

**February 12<sup>th</sup>** – Rena & Jeff Whitehall

**February 20<sup>th</sup>** – Sue & Alex Turner

**February 27<sup>th</sup>** – Ruth & Gary Chatburn

**March 6<sup>th</sup>** – Beth & Steve Herold

**March 13<sup>th</sup>** – Ruth & Gary Chatburn

**March 20<sup>th</sup>** – Sue & Alex Turner

**March 27<sup>th</sup>** – Andrea & David Watson

Please review the prayer list in the Sunday bulletin. If you have added someone to the list please update Leo Caesar with any new information and current status of the prayer concern. Please contact Leo Caesar if you wish to add/remove someone from the list.

### **Calendar & Mission Center News:**

The Coastal Bend Mission Center is proud to announce that the Coastal Bend web site is up and running! You can visit the site at [www.coastalbendmc.org](http://www.coastalbendmc.org)

**February 12<sup>th</sup> – 6:30 p.m.** – V-Day Dinner at Fairbanks

**February 12<sup>th</sup>** – Deadline to RSVP to Joanne Chapman for the Hearne 125<sup>th</sup> celebration

**February 20<sup>th</sup>** – Hearne 125<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebration. Ken Robinson from First Presidency is the guest speaker.

**April 2<sup>nd</sup>** – Special Mission Center Conference – Pasadena – 1:00- 3:00 p.m.

The following is a schedule of those that are currently scheduled to deliver the message for the 1<sup>st</sup> quarter. This is not the “official list” and is for informational purposes only. Please refer to the worship schedule in the fellowship hall for changes.

**February 12<sup>th</sup>** – Sue Turner

**February 20<sup>th</sup>** – Doug White

**February 27<sup>th</sup>** – Carole & Leo Caesar

**March 6<sup>th</sup>** – Gary Chatburn

**March 13<sup>th</sup>** – Testimony Service (Sue Turner presides)

**March 20<sup>th</sup>** – Carole & Leo Caesar

**March 27<sup>th</sup>** – John Reimer

### **World Conference 2005**

#### **"Lift Up an Ensign of Peace"**

#### **Scriptural Base: Doctrine and Covenants 102:11b, 156:6**

The First Presidency of Community of Christ have called a [special World Conference](#) June 2-5, 2005.

This will be for the specific purpose of considering and acting on the Council of Twelve’s recommendation of the name of the one they feel is called to be the church’s next prophet-president. This name will be determined through a [discernment process](#).

The church worldwide is invited to join these World Church leaders in the discernment process by upholding them in frequent prayer. We also ask for prayers on behalf of the church and those who will be working to finalize arrangements for this special World Conference. For this purpose we are designating **Sunday, February 27, 2005**, as a special day of prayer and preparation throughout the church.

I will be sending out periodic e-mails letting everyone know what is “HAPPENING” at Fairbanks. Please let me know if your e-mail or other contact information changes.

Mark your calendars and **participate, enjoy, reach out!!!!!!**I pray that everyone have a safe and happy week.

***Martha Romig***