

Christ Church + Washington Parish
The Rev. Cara Spaccarelli
First Sunday of Lent, March 10, 2019
Luke 4:1-13

There has been a lot of eagle drama this past month in southwest DC. The two eagles – Justice and Liberty – who nest in a tree on the police academy grounds are reality TV stars. A camera is on them 24/7. So when Justice, the male eagle, disappeared about a month ago after mating and fertilizing an egg with his eagle partner of 22 years, Liberty, the nature world took notice. Justice remained with the eggs for a week, but then she started leaving the nest for longer and longer chunks of time. With no partner to share in the incubating, the eggs wouldn't make it. Then, about two weeks after Justice had disappeared; Liberty disappeared as well. The experts figured she had abandoned the nest – not a terribly unusual occurrence. Lo and behold though, about three weeks after he left, Justice showed back up at the nest and Liberty, a week gone, came around too. The couple reconciled.

The eagle experts identified stress as the cause for the two eagles' disappearance from the nest, but it wasn't an environmental stress like construction but just general stress. Now experts don't give animals emotional lives like humans, for good scientific reason. But I'm not an eagle expert, so I will give them an emotional life. Justice and Liberty were having some issue, and Justice walked out. Liberty was okay for a few days, and then she needed to get food and she started leaving the nest for short trips. She felt better the further away from the nest she was until the day she decided not to return; she didn't want to return to all those bad feelings associated with her home with Justice. It was just too hard to be there – without her pair of 22 years, her eggs no longer viable, it was easier to start over rather than deal with what happened there. It is easier to start again than go to place of loss.

Contemporary theologian, Richard Rohr, compares the observance of Easter and Lent this way: “Resurrection takes care of itself. It’s getting people into tombs that’s hard.” I feel that this Lent. Not getting other people into tombs, but letting myself sit in one. With our departure from DC just a few weeks away, I know that if I stop moving from the work to-do list, the home to-do list, the day-to-day living to-dos, if I stop, the gravity of the goodbye that is coming hits. While there is no death involved, all of it at once is a loss that sure feels like death. In the case of real death, it isn’t unusual for a grieving family to take great comfort in the distraction that planning the funeral, the reception, and putting together the photo display. The to-do list is a distraction from the tomb; it is also simply living, but a good indicator that it’s not just living is that you fear the activity stopping, and you have to do something else to keep you from emotionally heading to the tomb. The tomb though is a prerequisite for resurrected life. Activity is not to be confused with resurrected life.

Lent is the season that we are invited to head towards the tomb. Not to bail on the difficult questions and emotions that our nest holds and seek another, but to prepare to return to them and wade through them even if means heading to the metaphorical tomb. We do so with the promise of the metaphorical resurrection – new life – but we can’t skip the tomb. Maybe the eagles knew that.

The path to the tomb begins with a trip to the desert. People have gone to the desert when the distractions of life have prevented them from discerning something important. Jesus is no different. He heads to the desert after his baptism, after hearing that he is God’s son and

experiencing the spirit touch him. What does being God's son mean? What does one do with that? Jesus heads to the desert full of the spirit, hoping to figure it out without the distractions of the people around him. The interchange between Jesus and the devil looks less like a conversation and more like a string of natural ideas in his own head as Jesus wades through what this all means. The three temptations can be read as possible answers to the question of who he is and what that means for how he lives. Does being God's son mean changing the world – make the stones bread? Does being God's son mean taking power over all the world? Does being God's son mean proving yourself through some spectacular display?

A prominent 20th century spiritual writer, Henri Nouwen, linked the three temptations to three lies people tell themselves about who they are. The first – “tell these stones to become bread” is the temptation for one who tell themselves the lie – “I am what I do.” The second – “All this I will give you” – is the temptation to the lie “I am what I have.” The third – “throw yourself down and let the angels catch you so not a scratch is on you” and others thus can see how special God thinks you are – the temptation to the lie “I am what others say or think about me.”

All of us tell ourselves these lies some of the time: “I am what I do,” “I am what I have”, “I am what others think or say about me.” But we tend to favor one over the others. The favored one tends to be the one that drives our self-worth; it is where we go if we need an ego boost, and when it gets threatened, it shakes us. It drives our day-to-day, even if what we don't realize it. What we do, that is obvious what that involves. What you have doesn't have to be just possessions – it can be ideas, even relationships where it looks like a huge emphasis on loyalty,

and “what other say or think” is the feedback that get from relationships – not simply ‘do people like me’, but it is do people see me as helpful, smart, useful, powerful, charming – whatever it is you want to be seen as even if you aren’t aware of it. In the enneagram spirituality study the 20s/30s group did this past winter, all but one person around the table fell into “I am what I do” or “I am what others think or say about me.” This is Washington – it is who knows you and how hard you work, right.

It is part of the human condition to link one’s identity in this way; evolutionarily speaking it is very helpful to care about what you do, what you have, how others relate to you. As we mature though, it is important to not equate who we are with them – the “I am” part of the statement needs to be softened not hardened. Because who we are is not what we do, or have, or what others see us as– who you are is a child of God. That is the source of your worth and identity.

Even Jesus needed to hear it. I’m not what I do no matter how many miracles and healings. I’m not what I have no matter how many followers I have. I’m not what others say – good or bad about me. Jesus responds to all of these temptations of self-definition with Scripture. It is God – God that defines me. God who will guide me in how to be as his child. Scripture is a good place to start to figure out what that means.

So is prayer. It is easy to say “I am a child of God” but hard to know it in your heart and mind powerfully enough to resist the temptations to define ourselves by the things of this world.

Prayer can counter the lies we tell about where our worth comes from – prayer that matches

whatever is most tempting for you personally. For those who tend to cling to “doing” for self-worth, your prayer posture is stillness. Stop doing. For those who tend to cling to what you have, your prayer posture is silence – not just exterior silence, but interior silence for your ideas are things you have and cling to as well. For those who need the feedback loop from others, your prayer posture is solitude. The prayer posture matched to your temptation tends to be what you resist; practicing it can feel painful, because the temptation it counters is what you equate with life-giving energy. So pulling away from it feels like pulling away from life, heading so to speak to the tomb, but, but the tomb is a prerequisite for truly resurrected life.

“Resurrection takes care of itself. It’s getting people into tombs first that’s hard.” Stillness, Silence, and Solitude. Jesus got all three in the desert. The desert isn’t the tomb. But it prepared him for it. Detaching from the other tendencies of where to find worth, coming to know his worth in God in the depth of his being. Knowing that prepared him for the gifts and losses of life; it prepared him for the tomb that we will all face practically and metaphorically speaking, and then to resurrected life. May we be open to following this Lent, to resist the temptations that distract us from our true worth, and follow Jesus into the tomb towards resurrected life.