

Scripture: Gen 9:8-17, Psalm 25:1-10, 1 Peter 3:18-22, Mark 1:9-15

At some point we all leave home. It is something we do throughout our lives. Over and over we leave home. We have all done it. We leave home physically, emotionally, and spiritually. We leave those places that are familiar, comfortable, predictable. Sometimes we cannot wait to leave. Other times we would rather not leave. Sometimes we choose to leave. Other times the circumstances of life push us out the door. Regardless of how or why it happens, leaving home is a part of life. It happens in lots of different ways and times.

For children it might be the first day of school or going to summer camp. Young adults move out of their parent's home to start college or go to work. The significant changes of life are forms of leaving home: a marriage, a divorce, the birth of a child, the death of a loved one. New employment or the loss of employment are about leaving home. Moving to a new town, retirement, the loss of health, all involve leaving home. Moving to a more spiritual life in ordained ministry, as a nun, as an associate, or an oblate is leaving home. In fact, the major decisions that bring us to the crossroads of life are also about leaving home.

Leaving home can be difficult, frightening, and risky. It invites us to change and opens us to new discoveries about ourselves. It challenges our understandings of where we find significance, meaning, and security. Ultimately, though, leaving home is the beginning of our spiritual journey and growth. We are more vulnerable and in need of God when we leave home.

Leaving home is not simply about the circumstances of life. It is the way of God's people. Adam and Eve left the garden. Noah left his dry land home. God told Abram, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you" (Gn. 12:1). Jacob ran away from home fearing for his life. Moses and the Israelites left their homes in Egypt. And in today's gospel Jesus is leaving home.

As Mark tells it, "Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee" to the Jordan River. He left his home and now stands with John in the Jordan, the border between home and the wilderness. There He is baptized. The heavens are torn apart, the Spirit like a dove descends, and a voice declares, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." From there "the Spirit immediately drove Him out into the wilderness." Baptism may happen in the river, but the baptismal life begins in the wilderness.

This story is not just about Jesus. It is our story too. The Father's words refer to Jesus in a uniquely literal way, but they also apply to each one of us. By grace, gift, and the choice of God we are His beloved daughters and sons. If leaving home, getting baptized, and going to the wilderness is Jesus's way then it is our way too. We leave behind our old identity, we are identified and claimed by God as His children, and we go to the wilderness.

That is what this holy season of Lent is about. It is no coincident that on Wednesday we were marked with the ashes of remembrance, the dust of our creation, and today the gospel takes us to the wilderness. The two cannot be separated. Wednesday's ashes lead us to wilderness soil. Lent is about leaving home and leaving home, in Lent and life, always takes us to the wilderness.

The wilderness is an in between place. It is a place of transition, a threshold. We are betwixt and between. Neither here nor there. We have left behind what was and what will be is not yet clear. In the wilderness we come face to face with the reality of our lives; things done and left undone, our fears, our hopes and dreams, our sorrows and losses, as well as the unknown. These facts of our life are the source of our temptations.

We tend to externalize temptations and make them about behavior. Behavior is important but the real temptations are from within us, not around us. We are either tempted to believe that we are more than or less than the dust of God's creation or we are tempted to not trust God's willingness to get his hands dirty in the dust of who we are. The temptations are not finally about our behavior, breaking rules, or being bad. God does not tempt us to see if we will pass or fail. The temptations are for our benefit, not God's.

They are a part of our salvation. We leave home and experience wilderness temptations to discover that our most authentic identity is as a beloved child of God and our only real home is with God.

The wilderness is new territory for us. In the wilderness the old structures, the ones we left behind, no longer contain, support, or define our life. It is not, however, uncharted territory. The way has already been cleared by Jesus. It is the way home, the way to God. We go to the wilderness with the knowledge and confidence that Christ has gone before us. Leaving home is not so much a loss for us but an opportunity for God. In the wilderness our illusions of self-sufficiency become surrender to God, our helplessness opens us to God's grace, and our guilt is overcome by God's compassion. That is what happens when you leave home.

Let me tell you about a time when I left home. At the start of my second year in the deacon formation program, I was told to get a spiritual director. Someone suggested that I try the convent. I set up an appointment and met with Sr. Barbara Jean who was the superior and she assigned Sr. Deborah Francis to be my spiritual director. My first session was 18 years ago and I have been coming monthly since then. In that first session, I was told that I needed to read the bible daily. At that time, I was only 4 years sober. I said, "I don't know if I can do that. In addition to working a full time job, every Saturday is committed to either class or the hospital working on my clinical pastoral education, then there is homework and I have to go to AA meetings." Very calmly she suggested that I just read the daily scriptures listed in Forward Day by Day. I continued to work with Sr. Deborah Francis until she went to assist at the church in New York.

I was then assigned to Sr. Pamela for spiritual direction. Sr. Pamela said, "You have been coming here for quite a while, have you ever considered becoming an associate?" I asked, "What is an associate and how do I become one?" As an associate you are making a commitment to CSJB, there is an associate's retreat and an Epiphany party where new members are accepted. Associates also help at special events and commemoration day. After a year as an associate, I was ready for a stronger commitment and became an oblate probationer. As an oblate, we prepare and live by a rule of life that is renewed yearly. Our rule of life includes things like reading the bible and other spiritual materials, doing a daily office, attending church, spiritual direction, oblate meetings and an overnight retreat.

Oblates have a stronger connection to the convent and readily give themselves to help. Oblates are involved in the refounding efforts and chair refounding committees. One of the biggest benefits of becoming an oblate is actually the same as being in AA, you get to be with like minded people who share the same desires, commitments and goals. They become more like family and everyone cares for and prays for everyone else.

My experience in this wilderness led to spiritual growth. My helplessness opened me to God's grace. And my guilt which was plenty when I first came in was overcome by God's compassion. That is what happened to me when I left home and can happen when you leave home.

We can never escape or avoid the wilderness. Like Jesus, we must go through it. We must face the temptations of Satan and be with the wild beasts. Yet we never go alone. The angels that ministered to Jesus will be there for us. "Remember who you are," is their message. "You are a beloved son of God. You are a beloved daughter of God. You are the one with whom He is well pleased." Over and over they tell us, remind us, encourage and reassure us.

With each remembrance of who we are the demons are banished. With each remembrance of who we are we overcome Satan's temptations. With each remembrance of who we are we take another step toward God. That is the way through the wildernesses of life. Remembrance after remembrance. Step after step. "I am a beloved child of God. With me He is well pleased." Let that become our wilderness mantra. Let those words fill our minds, cross our lips, and occupy our hearts. The truth of those words is the way home. Amen.