



A Pastoral Letter for Lent 2021

15 February 2021

Dear Members of the Episcopal Diocese of Central Pennsylvania,

Our gospel lesson for the first Sunday in Lent this year (Year B in the Eucharistic cycle) is brief. In his characteristic "outline style," the Evangelist Mark does not give us the details of Jesus' time in the wilderness, but says, simply: "He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him" (Mark 1: 13). Mark's brevity is part of his breathless style that pulls us through the life, ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus in short order, giving us a sense of the urgency of God's mission. In this reading, Mark's scant details only assure us that Jesus' time in the wilderness was both challenging-- temptation, wild beasts-- but also companioned by grace-- waited on by angels.

We are approaching the one-year mark of living with a pandemic. We are weary. Some of us have been sick, there have been COVID-deaths in our parishes and among our families and loved ones, and we ache for the familiar consolation of the Church and her sacred spaces. There are weeks when the days drag on, and others where, when Friday arrives, it seems as though it were right on the heels of Monday. We have been both challenged, tempted, and confronted by the wild beasts in our landscape, and also accompanied by grace and waited on by angels as we have received kind words, love, and the ministrations of others in this pandemic wilderness. As we look to our new church season, some have remarked that we have "already lived our Lent this year," and it does seem strange to be encouraging a season of prayer, fasting, and self-denial in a time when it seems that we have done nothing but pray, fast from the rhythm and routine of our regular lives, and deny ourselves over and over again the things that nurture and nourish us. The "new normal" has become gathering with children and grandchildren over Face Time, shopping for groceries on our computer, and stopping by church to pick up communion to receive in the safety of our homes. I pray for you, for your families, and for the safety of our clergy without ceasing.

We will endure. We will move through this pandemic to the other side, and we will be back in church again, as soon as it is safe. We will rejoice, we will celebrate, we will sing "Alleluia." Of this I am sure. And, until then, we must use the deep spiritual strength that we have to wrestle with the wild beasts and to allow the angels in our midst to attend us.

In this Lenten season, we will focus on the good work of Social Justice that is taking place in Central Pennsylvania. In spite of the pandemic, the heart of care and compassion continues to beat across our diocese. We are not only caring for the hungry and homeless and those in need but working to address the systemic issues that cause our neighbors to be in want. A special online Lenten series: "40 Ways" will highlight the work of social justice in our diocese with daily videos on our website featuring diocesan ministries that are working to address all forms of injustice and oppression and need. And I will be leading a weekly Zoom/FaceBook Live Lenten event on Wednesday nights at 7 PM called "40 Ways: A Heart for Social Justice" as we explore the Christian call to work for freedom, equity, and justice. I hope that you will spend some of your Lenten hours with us as we study this core of our Christian Way.

As we toe our way towards the start line of the Lenten wilderness journey, remember in this time that "joy comes in the morning" (Psalm 30:5). Our trials weigh heavy upon us now, and, still, we live in the sure and certain hope of resurrection and the power of eternal life.

Please know of my gratitude for you in these times, my appreciation for your patience and faithfulness, and my love.

May God bless us, guide us, and keep us, always.

+Audrey

The Rt. Rev. Audrey C. Scanlan, XI Bishop