

## Homily for 2/18 First Sunday in Lent

Rachel Wheeler

Good morning. Happy Lent! Some of you may know me as a teacher at the University of Portland. I teach in the Theology Dept and my field of study is spirituality. I study the Christians who lived in the third and fourth centuries and who were known as the desert fathers and mothers. They were inspired by what we read today from the gospels: Jesus going out into the desert. The gospels of Matthew and Luke are a bit more elaborate, describing how the devil brought before Jesus an array of options that would take Jesus away from his faithful life. Mark gives the simplest account: "He remained in the desert for forty days, tempted by Satan." All Synoptic gospels mention *the Spirit drove Jesus* into the desert wilderness. It's worth pondering the means of that driving and how similarly the Spirit inspires us. Was Jesus fleeing his ministry among friends, fatigued and worn out? Or was Jesus drawn by love to the refuge he knew the wild would offer him, where animals and angels would provide company and comfort? Could it be both?

Three centuries later, the desert Christians were withdrawing from what they saw as a corrupt earthly kingdom: the Roman Empire. They moved into the deserts of Egypt, Palestine, and Syria. Most of them were hoping Jesus might return any moment. Most of them believed the Roman Empire deserved to come to an end and they wanted to withdraw their support of its corruption by living in an alternative manner, off the grid so to speak. They learned to grow their own food in places where it was pretty hard to grow food. They learned to live a radically simple life dependent on the land, one another, and the many pilgrims who visited and cared for them. Their days were spent praying psalms, dwelling in contemplative silence, observing the ways of the natural world, and wrestling with fear, doubts, regret, sadness, anger.

They weren't actually a lot different from us today. And neither were their times so different from ours. Today, certainly, we are learning more about climate change and about our need for deep adaptation to crises beginning to unfold and intensify all over the world. We need to develop what Debra Rienstra calls a *refugia faith*. This is a faith that seeks & creates hidden shelters, that celebrates ordinary wonders, and that contributes to the healing of Earth.

Debra describes the eruption of Mt. St. Helens in 1980. Some of you may remember that. I was just a kid living in North Bend at the time so have pretty dim memories of it. 540 million tons of ash were spewed from the mountain and fell over 22,000 square miles. If you've seen maps of this fallout, you'll see trace amounts of ash were found as far as Colorado, Minnesota, and Oklahoma. It was assumed, Debra points out, that it would take several generations for life to come back to the areas most affected by the

hot ash. But in only one generation, the mountains were covered with grass and wildflowers. Trees and critters returned. Streams began to flow again. Why did life come back so quickly and with such vigor? Debra quotes Corvallis-based writer, Kathleen Dean Moore: “What the scientists know now, but didn’t understand then, is that when the mountain blasted ash and rock across the landscape, the devastation passed over some small places hidden in the lee of rocks and trees. Here, a bed of moss and deer fern under a rotting log. There, under a boulder, a patch of pearly everlasting and the tunnel to a vole’s musty nest.” These pockets of safety are *refugia*, what biologists identify as habitats that convey spatial and temporal resistance and/or resilience to disturbed biotic communities. What happens ecologically is that these little hubs of resistance and resilience connect eventually and then enable the resurgence of life throughout a landscape. Debra Rienstra thinks our own lives need to operate as refugia in which we develop capacity to withstand chaos going on around us and from which we generate new life. Our families and groups of friends might constitute refugia. Our community of faith here at St. Andrew’s might constitute refugia. She describes these places beautifully and the principles that help us identify and create them:

These are humble spaces in which we see ourselves as part of the community of creation. In them, we learn to live by the “house rules” that enable all people and all life to flourish. These are inclusive spaces, supporting diversity and justice, giving agency and voice to those who have experienced disempowerment. These are spaces where grief and lamentation are appropriate and perhaps even inevitable, where we can consider what systems make refugia necessary and we can commit to change these systems. These are challenging spaces, that call us to let go of old, unhelpful habits of mind and heart as we make room for what is new and more conducive to creation’s flourishing. These are healing spaces. Reorienting spaces, where the gifts of our tradition may be repurposed to help us develop capacity to dwell with trauma and to transform the conditions that cause it. These are spaces, too, of joy, where gratitude and wonder are fostered as we celebrate all that makes life still possible.

Refugia are not meant to be where we hunker down, putting our heads in the sand. From refugia we’re fully aware of what is going on around us and that we are part of. But we give life – we give Spirit – a chance to work in us, restoring, challenging, and healing us. I wonder if we might sense that built into our liturgical year, here in Lent, we have a chance to get ready to better meet the challenges that are already upon us. Lent is a refugium in time as we build capacity through tending to our deeper awareness of our lives to recognize and respond to the injustices around us.

I want to close with a few questions associated with the deep adaptation work that is going on worldwide right now, as communities respond to the real threats of climate

change and resource scarcity. These questions feel relevant to begin with during our observing Lent this year as we start with our own lives, consider the implications of these questions in our smaller communities, and together build resilience for working with communities at different scales.

First question: What do we most value that we want to keep and how? This is a question of resilience. What do we most value that we want to keep and how?

Question 2: What could we let go of so as not to make matters worse? That is a question of relinquishment. What could we let go of so as not to make matters worse?

Question 3. What could we bring back to help us in these difficult times? That is a question of restoration. What could we bring back to help us in these difficult times?

Finally: With what and with whom shall we make peace as we awaken to our common mortality? This is a question of reconciliation. With what and with whom shall we make peace as we awaken to our common mortality.

From dust we came, to dust we return. Or as the folks at Incarnation Monastery in Berkeley, CA put it: *Remember you are of the Earth and with the Earth you will be transformed.*