

March 5, 2017  
Christ Church, Mexia  
1<sup>st</sup> Lent

Two boys were walking home from church after hearing a strong preaching on the devil. One said to the other, "What do you think about all this Satan stuff?" The other boy replied, "Well, you know how Santa Claus turned out. It's probably really just your dad"

I don't suppose Boot Camp is the favorite memory of anyone who has served in the armed forces. But I'm told that most people in the armed services eventually come to realize that the physical conditioning and training is designed to save your life. In fact an old friend of mine, told me, shortly after he completed wilderness survival training, that "if you starve when there are cockroaches around, you deserve to starve." Lent may be a little like a sort of spiritual Boot Camp, designed to save your life

In fact, well known Episcopal preacher, Barbara Taylor says that she thinks of Lent as a sort of Outward Bound for the soul. No one has to sign up for it, but if you do then you give up the illusion that you are in control of your life. You place yourself in the hands of strangers who ask you to trust them and then do foolhardy things, like walk backwards over a precipice with nothing but a rope around your waist or climb a sheer rock face with your fingers and toes. But none of these is the real test, because while you are doing them you have plenty of people around and lunch in a cooler.

The real test comes when you go it alone. The strangers put you out all by yourself in the middle of nowhere and wish you luck for the next 24 hours. That is

when you find out who you are. That is when you find out what you really miss and what you are really afraid of. Some participants dream about their favorite food. Some long for a safe room with a door to lock and others just wish they had a pillow, but they all find out what their pacifiers are -- the habits, substances or surroundings they use to comfort themselves, to block out pain and fear.

Without all those things that we normally depend on for comfort and reassurance, we are suddenly exposed; rather like an addict who has just run out of their favorite pain-killer. Suddenly to have to face the world without anesthesia is hard. In fact, it's awful.

You know that hollow sort of empty feeling you get sometimes in the pit of your stomach? That's not really a sign that something is wrong. It's not loneliness and it's not a virus. It's a sort of space inside you; a holy of holies that you were made with that only God is supposed to occupy. We will do almost anything to get rid of that feeling. That's where our pacifiers come in. We suck on them for all we're worth: TV, food, alcohol, the internet, some of the apps on my phone. They don't provide much nourishment, but they do plug the hole. The trouble is, nothing really fills that hole nor satisfies that hunger but God.

To enter the wilderness without a pacifier, stripped bare, depending on nothing but God to care for you; that's when you find out who you really are and whose you really are. It doesn't matter what you give up. It can be something very small. But for the next 40 days, pay attention to how often your mind is distracted by that small thing. Ask yourself why it happens when it happens. Are you hungry? Well, what's wrong with being hungry? Are you lonely? What's so bad about

being alone? Maybe it would be helpful to keep a journal handy to keep track of all those stray thoughts and feelings.

Chances are you will hear a voice in your head that keeps warning you what will happen if you give up your pacifier. "You'll starve. You'll go nuts. You won't be yourself anymore." If that doesn't work, the voice will move to level two: "That's not a pacifier. That's a power tool. You need it to be effective. Can't you tell the difference?" If you don't fall for that one, there is always a third level: "If God really loves you, you can do whatever you want. Why waste your time on this useless exercise?"

If you don't know who that voice belongs to, read Matthew's story again. Then tell the devil to go back to hell where it belongs, and decide for yourself how you will spend Lent and your life. Better yet, decide who you are and whose you will be. Worship the Lord your God and serve no one and nothing else. Expect greatness, from God and from yourself. Why would you settle for less?