The Rev. James Richardson
First Sunday of Lent: March 1, 2020

What is sacred for you?
Your work? Your friends? The people you love? A particular place? Your beliefs? A cause dear to your heart? What is sacred for you?
Take a moment.
Now ask yourself this: What is not sacred for you? A destructive way of behaving? An unhealthy habit or addiction? A particular belief or viewpoint? A moment or incident in your past or in our collective past?
What is profane for you?
Take a moment.
In the season of Lent, we are confronted with these two questions – what is sacred and what is profane?
Our views of the sacred and profane shape us, shape our actions, and shape the world around us perhaps more than we realize.
Lent is a time to be particularly mindful of the sacred and profane. What do we hold sacred, and what do we hold profane? What are we for and what are we against?
Where do we draw the line?
In the gospel lesson today, Jesus is confronted with these same questions about both the sacred and the profane.
He is now an adult. The wise men, the shepherds in the field, his dedication at the Temple, his childhood, are long behind him.
Jesus goes to the River Jordan to be baptized by John the Baptist. The Spirit descends upon him “like a dove” and a voice from heaven calls him “the Beloved Son.”
He immediately sets forth into the wilderness to fast and to pray, and to confront these two questions: What is sacred and what is profane?
Where does he draw the line?
This story may sound unusual or fantastic to us, but I can tell you this kind of journey is a very common practice among people who live in the desert. The Paiute and Shoshone people of Nevada have done this. The indigenous people of Australia call this a “walkabout” and that is precisely what Jesus is doing.
On his walkabout, Jesus has this powerful, disturbing vision of the profane — a vision of evil itself.
Jesus is given three tests in the desert: First, the force of evil tempts him to break his fast by turning rocks into bread.
Then he is offered safety from falling off the pinnacle of the Temple.
Finally, he is offered political power over all the kingdoms of the world.
To each of these tests, Jesus says no.

Each of these tests is similar. Each amounts to putting self above others — break the fast, be protected from falling, or gain power. He is offered the profane path of power.

To each Jesus gives the same reply: That to take this route — the route of self above others — the route of the profane — is to violate the commandment to love God with your heart and all your soul and all your strength, the highest commandment, known in Judaism as the shema.

From these tests in the wilderness, Jesus learns he has the strength to heal people, and to walk with us through the hurts and wounds of life.

Ultimately, Jesus has the strength go to the cross to show us that there is more to life than death.

There are many lessons here for us today, more than we can absorb in one sitting. Some of these lessons will unfold for us this Lent.

One lesson is that struggling with our inner spiritual life is at the heart of living a faithful life. If Jesus struggled in his inner life, so can we. And from the struggle, no matter how messy or painful or difficult, will come strength.

And this journey of inner discovery is the gift of Lent: We go into the desert together. We try to fast from those things that get in our way of experiencing the fullness of God’s gift of life and salvation.

But we are also asked where we draw the line. What is sacred? And what is profane?

For Jesus, the shema — love of God, love of neighbor — defines the sacred.

Hate, indifference, selfishness, greed defines the profane.

These questions about the sacred and profane are not just about us as individuals. Lent is also about all of us together. Where do we fall short collectively from the shema?

A few days ago, many of us gathered here for the traditional Ash Wednesday observance, and with ashes on our foreheads, we were reminded of our mortal life and the sacred promise of new life beyond.

We were also reminded of the profane in our attitudes and behaviors as we knelt together to offer the Litany of Penitence.

The powerful words of the Ash Wednesday litany hit me every year with their truth about myself and, candidly, the truth about all of us in our common humanity.

The very first confession begins with “We.”

“We have not loved you with our whole heart, and mind, and strength. We have not loved our neighbors as ourselves.”

There is more:

“We have been deaf to your call to serve...
And more:
“...our blindness to human need and suffering, and our indifference to injustice and cruelty... our prejudice and contempt toward those who differ from us.”

“We confess to you, O Lord.”
We continue this prayer today in the Great Litany that opens our worship. We pray to be spared from corrupt and unjust government, from epidemic, drought and famine; fire, flood and earthquake.

“Good Lord, deliver us.”
These are not new prayers. We pray these words every year.
In days ahead this Lent, we will begin each of our Holy Eucharists by repenting of the evils we have done, and the evils done our behalf. We seek forgiveness from God.

But how do we repent? And what does forgiveness look like?
Repentance, I believe, begins with understanding the sacred and the profane in our life and in the world.

And understanding begins with openness to hearing our stories of the sacred and profane. From understanding each other can come our actions: our love of God, our love of neighbor — and our rejection of evil.

And what is forgiveness? The best definition I’ve heard is this: Forgiveness is the healing of the past. Without forgiveness, the past holds us captive.

This is a long path to walk and it will take a lifetime. But this is why we take this journey into the wilderness together in Lent. We don’t go alone, the One who walked ahead into the wilderness long ago is with us. Allow me to end with a few lines from poet Jan Richardson¹ (no relation):

“If you would enter
into the wilderness
do not begin without a blessing.
Do not leave
without hearing
who you are:
Beloved,
named by the One
who has traveled this path
before you.”

May each of us have a Holy and sacred Lent. Amen.

¹ Jan Richardson, Circle of Grace: A Book of Blessings for the Seasons, 2015