

February 18, 2024  
Gun Violence Lent  
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This past Wednesday marked our entry into the holy season of Lent

In some cultures, lives and lifestyles are drastically changed during this season as an enduring reminder of the penitential season

When I was studying abroad in Regensburg, Germany in the state of Bavaria – which is a very Roman Catholic region – even the local pub went from serving two kinds of beer (helles, light, and dunkles, dark) to just one: Bock beer was the Lent beer

You couldn't order anything else: just Bock beer, "liquid bread" as it was colloquially referred to

The local lore is that monks in Germany were brewing this beer way back in the day and that this was the only thing they were eating or drinking during Lent – the Pope apparently caught wind of this and was horrified: "We can't have monks drunk the whole season of Lent."

So, the monks sent the Pope a barrel, and being the time before refrigerated rail cars or planes, the beer skunked along the way and so when the Pope tasted the beer he said: "oh my goodness, if they can drink this and be sustained by it for 40 days they have my blessing"

If there have been ways Americans changed our world in order to mark the season of Lent, we have lost those signs and signals

In today's world, the wilderness of Lent is something we have to make a conscious effort to enter into

Which might sound absolutely ridiculous to our faithful ancestors – why would you want to enter the wilderness?

Throughout the Bible, the wilderness is a place of “in between” – it’s the place of transitions and insecurity: the Israelites wandered in the wilderness for 40 years after their liberation from Egypt

Jesus’ wilderness was filled with temptations by satan and wild beasts – sounds great, sign me up, how do I get whisked away to the wilderness, too?

For as much as the wilderness time is one of great challenge, the result of coming out of the wilderness is often an experience of transformation and new life on the other side

Jesus emerges from the wilderness with an air of confidence and courage, even in the face of the danger that afflicts his comrade John the Baptist he comes out boldly proclaiming: “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.”

Mark, our gospel writer from this morning, gives us very few details about what transpired in the wilderness, but it’s clear that the effect on Jesus is one of conviction and clarity of purpose

It’s hard to say something like “we need the wildernesses of our lives” in order to have that same clarity and confidence that Jesus exudes because it feels like a slippery slope from a comment like that to “God lets bad things happen as a way to test us”

But, what I mean by “we need the wilderness experiences of our lives” is not because God makes bad things happen, but our world certainly is full of the greatest challenges of our lives and we need a place, a time, an experience that allows us to face them, address them, and shake them off

Only then, can we move forward with the conviction and clarity of purpose that we see embodied by our great prophet, teacher, and Savior

We need the wilderness, we need the time of prayer and fasting, we need to intentionally acknowledge and face the temptations of our lives to have any chance of repentance, any chance of turning away and starting anew

Lent is an intentional time we set apart to attempt to do just that and we do not journey into this time of intentional reckoning alone, we do it together, with the trust and faith that the end of our journey in the wilderness will bring liberation and resurrection

And, this year, in particular, we enter into these 40 days with a Gun Safety Awareness Sabbath

Sponsored by the Maine Council of Churches and the Episcopal Diocese of Maine, this Sabbath is a call upon all people of faith to reckon with the sin of gun violence in our communities and to commit to ending such violence as best we're able

I want to give you a brief warning that the statistics I'm about to share are disconcerting and they mention suicide.

In the last decade, the rate of gun deaths in Maine grew by 20% and the rate of suicide by gun grew 27%. In an average year, guns kill nearly 150 Mainers, 8 of them children.

The Diocese shared, "We must do better. Let us begin by joining our voices in prayer this Gun Safety Awareness Sabbath weekend. And then, let our prayers inspire action to ensure that Mainers who own guns do so safely and responsibly, that those who sell firearms are empowered and required to protect our communities from those who are unable to practice safe and responsible gun ownership, and that the capacity of guns to inflict mass casualties is limited."<sup>1</sup>

In response to the atrocious mass shootings that our society has become acquainted with, we have started to hear many of our siblings beginning to lament: "no more thoughts and prayers."

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<sup>1</sup> <https://episcopalmaine.org/event/gun-safety-awareness-sabbath/>

This is in a way a prophetic cry demanding that those with power act rather than simply saying in press conference after press conference “we offer our thoughts and prayers to those affected”

You’ve heard me say that I believe that “thoughts and prayers” are more powerful than people give credit for, but perhaps what we should be saying is “I will enter the wilderness of this sin with you, and I will come out it on the other side with clarity of purpose and a conviction to make the world better!”

Perhaps what gun violence needs in this time is not just a Gun Safety Sabbath but a Gun Violence Lent

We need a place, a time, an experience that allows us to face this sin, address this sin, and shake this sin

We need to be whisked away into the wilderness and directly confront the sins of guns, and what I mean is this sense among some of our siblings that the protection of their guns is more important than the protection of our neighbors, our children

We need to confront our own feelings and beliefs about gun safety, and we need to prayerfully await the inspiration of the angels in our midst who will guide us

And, then, we need to come out of that wilderness with a clarity of thought, a conviction of purpose, a belief that we will and can respond to the needs of our community even in the face of the fear mongering of this topic

And when fears of mixing religion and politics arise, as they tend to do when we say that our religious convictions cause us to behave and act in certain ways, Matt Skinner, Professor of New Testament at Luther Seminary in MN, encourages us in his reflection on these texts: “we see that this gospel aims to paint Jesus’ ministry as confrontational” he says. “Jesus has come to combat and perhaps defeat forces determined to counteract God’s intentions for human well-being.”<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/first-sunday-in-lent-2/commentary-on-mark-19-15-3>

We know that Jesus wasn't a warrior, and he wasn't even really an official politician, but he certainly came to combat and to defeat the forces of this world that are determined to counteract God's intentions for human well-being.

If you've been wondering what your Lenten wilderness might look like this year, perhaps it's a commitment to learning, reflecting, and facing our nation's and state's sin of gun violence

And you do not enter that wilderness alone - this is a journey that requires a community of saints to go with you and that is what the Maine Council of Churches is committing to and I commit to going with you, too

This is precisely what this season invites us to do, to choose to intentionally enter the wilderness of our sins trusting that we will experience liberation on the other side

This is an absolutely wild concept for many to grasp, but those of us who have faithfully journeyed through the wilderness before know the blessing of its honesty and of the grace that meets us on the other side.

Our world, these days, may not look that different during Lent – we don't get the benefit of limited beer options to remind us of our spiritual journeys – but, it does feel like the world could look different when we come out of this wilderness, when our Lenten journeys end and we have Jesus' clarity of purpose and conviction

May the blessing of these 40 days bring you that clarity of purpose and conviction of faith to which you are being called

Amen.