

# Holy Smokes

*Sermon preached by the Rev. Edward M. Sunderland, LCSW,  
Associate Rector for Community Ministry,  
at the nine o'clock service.*

*February 26, 2012: The First Sunday of Lent.  
Based on Genesis 9:8-17, and Mark 1:9-15.*

**A**s a child I was definitely more of an Advent and Christmas Christian than a Lent and Easter Christian. Advent is shorter and less rigorous than Lent. At the end of the shorter season with less rigorous preparation there is Christmas with all the excitement of a visit from Santa Claus, presents, food and family. Lent is two weeks longer and one is expected—and in my family forced—to make a sacrifice, to give something up. When I was a child it was usually chocolate and all candy, desserts after supper, and meat on Fridays. And then after all that rigorous preparation and sacrifice what do you get? Several long services, a new set of clothes, and hard-boiled eggs. It wasn't till I entered seminary that I even heard that Easter was supposed to be a bigger celebration than Christmas.

There is another reason for my "Lentophobia," and it is of course due to a traumatic childhood experience. Early on, I had heard the Surgeon General's messages about smoking and showed an early inclination for one of my two professions. Which is to say that I started preaching at the age of six or seven to my father that he should just quit smoking. Now my father smoked several packs a day and you do not have to be a licensed clinical social worker or an addiction specialist to guess that these first recorded attempts at preaching were not terribly successful. In fact they were not successful at all. Oh, he made noises about quitting but never seemed to be able to stop. And then for Lent 1968 he quit. Cold turkey. He announced on Shrove Tuesday that he was giving up smoking and I have never seen him smoke another cigarette. Now this was not as satisfying, to be honest, as it was traumatic. It was traumatic on several levels. First, change is never easy but as one is emerging from late childhood this is the sort of change that turns one into an adolescent. You think you've figured it all out, you know the rules, and then they go and change the game on you. My father wasn't supposed to listen to me; I was supposed to listen to him. In my life this was even more traumatic because as my father quit smoking he began taking a sincere interest in my goings and comings. He asked all the journalistic questions. Who are your friends? Where are you going? What will you be doing there? And the most popular of all, When will you be home? The combination of my father quitting cigarettes cold turkey as we embraced my early adolescence was traumatic enough for both of us to lose our religion.

When I first came into St. Bart's after the pews had all been replaced with chairs, I remember thinking that the visual effect was shocking. It appeared to me that the chairs were just a little bit shorter than the pews. But somehow the little bit of change made the church feel incredibly more open. It was as if the horizon had dropped a tad and I could see more of the beauty of the church. I was really shocked—how had I been so blind? The visual effect is the same reason that the sky seems so much bigger in the desert. Out West in the wilderness there is less to block the view. In scripture the wilderness is a place where there is less blocking the view, but it isn't always beautiful. It is not a safe place; it is a place of wild beasts and of temptation. The wilderness is not an easy place but it is an important place. For Jesus it was a place of contemplation and reflection between his baptism and his ministry.

Saul Alinsky, the great social worker and community organizer, who has not only served as a role model to our President but also to your preacher, spoke of the importance of contemplation and reflection in the life of a modern activist as he described a surprising wilderness.

"When you're out in the arena all the time," Alinsky said, "you're constantly on the run, racing from one fight to another and from one community to another. Most of the time you don't have any opportunity for reflection and contemplation; you never get outside of yourself enough to gain a real perspective and insight into your own tactics and strategy. In the Bible the prophets could at least go out into the wilderness and get themselves together, but about the only free time I ever had was on a sleeper train between towns, and I was generally so knocked out by the end of the day I'd just pass out the minute my head hit the pillow. So my wilderness turned out to be jail."

Alinsky goes on to describe the advantages of jail as being away from phone calls and visitors. He goes on to disparage the company of jailers who were, and I quote, "generally so stupid you wouldn't want to talk to 'em anyway, and since your surroundings were so drab and depressing, your only escape was into your own mind and imagination." Finally, Alinsky points to the example of Martin Luther King, Jr. "It was only in Montgomery jail that he had the uninterrupted time to think out thoroughly the wider implications of his bus boycott, and later on his philosophy deepened and widened during his time in prison in Birmingham, as he wrote in 'Letter from a Birmingham Jail.'"

I would like to suggest that jail is not the only way for us, as modern urban people, active in the struggle for social justice, to get a change of scenery that will allow us time for contemplation and reflection. For Christians, Lent can provide a wilderness time. Lent can be a time to lower the horizon and increase the sight lines. It can be a time to escape into your own mind and imagination. Lent can be a time to change the furniture around and give yourself a chance to see the same space in a new way.

Some people take Lent as a time to take on new healthy habits, others try to give up an old unhealthy habit; but Lenten discipline is different from self-improvement. Lent is not about self improvement exactly but it is more about opening space, seeing things in a new way, and embracing change, as a way of preparing for Easter. Lent is a time to prepare to encounter the Risen Christ. How can one prepare for that?

Back to the story of my father and the cigarettes. There is one part of the story I did not mention at the beginning of the sermon. I was sure my father didn't know but in the winter of 1967, just before that traumatic Lent of 1968, I stopped preaching about the evils of smoking and started smoking myself. I began by taking cigarettes from my father's stash, but I only stole one or two out of each pack so that he never knew. I did not really like to smoke because it made me cough and choke and I did not like the taste. However, smoking—and perhaps more importantly having a ready supply of cigarettes—helped me fit in to a new crowd at school. Then Lent came along and my father gave up smoking and never smoked again. I had lost my supply of cigarettes, my new friends, and I was doomed to be a smokeless nerd, and that was traumatic. But not nearly as traumatic as the night seven years later, the night before I left for college, when my father decided to share the fact, that, of course, he had noticed that I was taking his cigarettes, and that the reason he quit was so that I would have to stop smoking.

In the end, Lent is about opening space in our own lives. Lowering the horizon, unblocking the view so that we can practice expressing love and receiving love.

Lent is a time to hear the message of God that we are children of God, beloved, in whom God is well pleased. To preach with Jesus the message that "the kingdom of God has come near," a message of repentance, change, and believing the good news.

Lent is a time to reflect and contemplate the love of God that conquered death and to prepare to encounter that same love on the way to the grave and on the way from the grave.

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