

Liberating Lent
A Sermon by the Rev. Scott Herr
First Presbyterian Church, New Canaan – February 21, 2021

Please read:
Genesis 9:8-17
Mark 1:9-15

On this first Sunday of Lent I would like to ask you to consider whether or not the gospel is a *gift*, or a *wage*? And secondly, is the gospel a *proclamation* of *good news*, or *information* about how to improve yourself? How you answer these questions will determine how you experience the season of Lent.

Lent is the 40 days from Ash Wednesday to the Saturday before Easter (excluding Sundays, which are *mini-Easters*) patterned after and used by the church to reflect on Jesus' temptations in the wilderness. Many people talk about "the Lenten journey," and see this time as a retracing Jesus' footsteps into the wilderness to help us confront our own temptations. Jesus, Mark writes, was driven by the Holy Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by Satan. Many Christians decide how they are going to use Lent as a time of spiritual boot camp, to become stronger or a "better Christian." And so some of us, including myself, commit to some extra spiritual disciplines like fasting, or praying or serving...

While I appreciate good intentions, remember: "the road to hell is paved with good intentions!" What I mean is that Lent is not primarily a season for spiritual *self*-improvement. It is not possible for you or anyone else to follow Jesus and defeat the Enemy. As most of you already know from experience, we are a feeble and fickle lot, hardly able to deny ourselves even chocolate for 40 days, let alone resist the stronger temptations that keep us from living a holy and just life.

So why do we have this annual ritual of remembering these 40 days of Jesus' life? I believe Lent is an opportunity to *rediscover the Gospel*, the good news that we are beloved sons and daughters, heirs of the King. In the gospel according to Mark, the temptation of Christ is tucked in between his baptism and his call to repentance and believe that the arrival of a new Kingdom, a new reality in Christ, has come.

At Jesus' baptism the heavens opened up and his confirmation was given by God... "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." Note that Jesus hasn't performed one miracle, hasn't done any teaching, hasn't achieved any following... And yet, God is *well pleased* with Jesus. This is an affirmation of *God's grace*, that the good news is given, not earned...

The question is, do we believe that God's love is a free gift, that Jesus has done for us that which we could not do for ourselves, that he is enough for us? This is the problem of grace, God's unmerited favor. Especially those of us who are high achievers and driven to pursue the best in everything, grace is hard for us to understand, let alone receive. Nonetheless, the Good news is that our salvation is a free gift of God's grace, not a wage to be earned.

So here's the thing... If we don't trust in God's presence and promises, then we can't accept grace, and we'll turn Lent into a self-help project. You know, try harder. Cue Rocky theme song. And we'll read a bit more and pray just a bit longer. It's the "Look busy, Jesus is coming" approach to the spiritual life. Brush up on our self-righteousness. Which is all rather a nuisance if you think about it. If we are really trying to make ourselves holy and righteous, perfect as God is perfect,

one of two things is going to happen. We will either become so exhausted that we'll burn out, or we will actually delude ourselves that we have become more perfect and we'll be absolutely intolerable to live with.

I was fascinated in one of our men's Bible study sessions, Armin Thies who is an experienced psychotherapist shared that in the clinical world burnout is a very serious issue. Burnout takes a person who is caring and makes them careless and even cruel. I would suggest to you that we need to liberate Lent so that the season meant to give a deeper experience of *grace* does not become a season that gives us *burnout*. Ironically, that would be caving to the temptations of the Enemy, and we will end up hating God and our neighbors. The true goal of any spiritual discipline is to set us free to love God and love our neighbors more.

The angels were there to help Jesus, and you'll remember that angels are throughout the Scriptures "messengers of God." They remind humans of what God has already said, or they are speaking to humans the Word of God in a new way. We all need fresh interpretations of old truths. I have throughout my years of ministry been amazed at how the same texts looks different in a new context of life. As Heraclitus once said, "No man ever steps in the same river twice, for it's not the same river and he's not the same man." We need fresh reminders of God's grace and love each moment of each day, because change is a constant. Did you note that in our Genesis text even God needs a reminder? The rainbow is not a sign to remind *us* of God's grace, but to remind God! I love that we have a rainbow flag hanging out near the front entryway, as if to say, this is a grace place, a place where all people (straight, LGBTQ, white, colored, young, old) ... ALL PEOPLE...

Which brings us, surprisingly, to the middle section of Mark's summary of Jesus forty days in the wilderness. Mark writes, "And he was with the wild beasts."

In other gospel versions we learn that Jesus was tempted by Satan about what his identity really meant. "*If you are the Son of God, turn these stones into bread...*" Matthew and Luke hearken back to the Garden of Eden story and the question, "Did God really say...?" The fundamental spiritual question for us all is do we believe God's Word to us that we are loved by God, or not? This is always the temptation of the Enemy of God, to ignore the presence and promises of God.

I never really paid much attention to these words, until I arrived here in New Canaan. If you read my *Tidings* articles, you are probably getting tired of reading about my regular animal sightings. Kim and I love watching the colorful variety of birds outside our kitchen window. I love seeing the deer who daily wander through our yard. After years of living in the city, we're rediscovering the beauty of nature and the wild beasts. I'm starting to understand more the spirituality of St. Francis of Assisi, who used to call the animals, no matter how small "brother" or "sister."

Did you know the Latin word for soul is *anima*, which is the root for our word *animal*? Perhaps there is an opportunity for our souls to be restored as we remember and return to a more holistic spirituality that pays attention to the fact that we are part of a much vaster creation. It was G. K. Chesterton who observed, "*A religion is not the church you go to, but the cosmos you live in.*"¹

¹ G. K. Chesterton, *Irish Impressions* (John Lan Company: 1919), 96.

Jesus spending time with the wild beasts is a reminder that God created the world and all that is in it and called it good. Is this Mark's way of describing Jesus' return to innocence, a flashback to the Garden of Eden? Howard Thurman, the mystic, theologian, and spiritual guide for Martin Luther King, Jr., and other Civil Rights leaders, shares one of his early experiences of God and the importance of paying attention to the world around you:

As a child I was accustomed to spend many hours alone in my rowboat, fishing along the river, when there was no sound save the lapping of the waves against the boat. There were times when it seemed as if the earth and the river and the sky and I were one beat of the same pulse. It was a time of watching and waiting for what I did not know—yet I always knew. There would come a moment when beyond the single pulse beat there was a sense of Presence which seemed always to speak to me. My response to the sense of Presence always had the quality of personal communion. There was no voice. There was no image. There was no vision. There was God.²

The word Lent itself points us back to nature, in that it comes from the Old English word, “Lencten,” meaning the lengthening of days. Lent is to be the holy Spring of the Church that opens us up to new life around us, how all creation is experiencing rebirth and regeneration. God's intention in Lent is for us to experience new life in the depths of our being, our anima, our souls.

This is why I asked the questions at the beginning of my sermon: Is the gospel a *gift* or a *wage*? Is the gospel *news* or *information*? If the gospel is a gift, then there is nothing we can do to earn it. We can only receive this good news as a gift, as a declaration that God has gone through our desert wilderness so that we can be called *beloved of God*... As Robert Capon once said, “Grace works without requiring anything on our part. It's not expensive. It's not even cheap. It's free!”³

Another way of putting this is that the gospel is either news about something that has been done for us in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, or it's information about how we must do life in order to better ourselves in the sight of God. Be careful here, because we too often in the church turn the *gospel* into *law*, into *how you can become a better person*. And the law will always break us. As theologians like to put it, *Lex semper accusat*. The *Law always accuses* and convicts us of our sin. That's a primary role of the law, and whenever we set ourselves up in a position to try and fulfill the law *we will fail*. Christ alone came to fulfill the law for us! We are to live by the Spirit of Christ and rely on God's grace to justify us.

Friends, Lent is for liberating us from our sin and pride, and from any illusions that somehow we are the source of new life. Lent is a time for spiritual refreshment and renewal, but not because you are going to do anything to make yourselves better. Remember that the Gospel is a *gift* and not a *wage*; it is *news* and not *information*. The gospel isn't even words, it is the Person of Jesus Christ! And Christ sets us free to live more into the values and vision of the Kingdom of God, a community, and kingdom where all are valued, welcomed as beloved. Even the animals!

² Howard Thurman, *Disciplines of the Spirit* (Harper and Row: 1963), 96.

³ Robert Capon, *The Romance of the Word: One Man's Love Affair with Theology* (Eerdmans, 1996).

So, the next time you see a bird, squirrel, rabbit, fox, or a deer...spend time with them, rest with them in God's gracious blessing as beloved. Liberate Lent and let go of the temptation to make the gospel anything less than what Christ has done for you that you could not do for yourself. Believe the good news of grace, and God's love for you and all Creation. Nothing more. Nothing less.

In the name of the One who is our Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer. Amen.