

LENT†

February 2019
Greendale Ecumenical Group
Worcester, Massachusetts

Ash Wednesday, March 6, 2019

Joel 2:1-2, 12-17 (Isa. 58:1-12); Psalm 51:1-7; 2 Corinthians 5:20b – 6:10; Matthew 6:1-6,16-21

Ash Wednesday is a day of preparation for the season of Lent. As such, the scriptures for this day instruct those who prepare on donning the right posture for the season, which is fundamentally that of humility. To assist in this preparation, I hear the words of Howard Thurman on “Wanting To Be Better.”

The concern which I lay bare before God today is my need to be better; I want to be better than I am in my most ordinary day-by-day contacts:

With my friends –

With my family –

With my casual contacts –

With my business relations –

With my associates in work and play.

I want to be better than I am in the responsibilities that are mine:

I am conscious of many petty resentments.

I am conscious of increasing hostility toward certain people.

I am conscious of the effort to be pleasing for effect, not because it is a genuine feeling on my part.

I am conscious of a tendency to shift to other shoulders burdens that are clearly my own.

I want to be better in the quality of my religious experience:

I want to develop an honest and clear prayer life.

I want to develop a sensitiveness to the will of God in my own life.

I want to develop a charitableness toward my fellows that is greater even than my most exaggerated pretensions.

I want to be better than I am.

I lay bare this need and this desire before God in the quietness of this moment.

Source: “Meditations of the Heart” by Howard Thurman

– Aaron R. Payson

Friday, March 8, 2019

Acts 7:20-34

Not everyone encounters God in an abrupt way. And St. Paul's recounting of this instance from the Old Testament with Moses and the burning bush is an in-your-face meeting. Not something to be taken lightly or ever forgotten.

Moses led a privileged life in Egypt until his eyes were opened to his lineage as a Hebrew and his witnessing mistreatment of Hebrews by the Egyptians. And the story tells us he lost his head and killed an Egyptian soldier who was beating a Hebrew worker. That was the end of his privileged life.

All of us let things under our skin that irritate us and drive us crazy, although most of us don't act of rage against others because of it. Right?

Moses got a second chance to redeem himself, and he built a new life in which he became a responsible family man. He had time to think, and when the time was right, God gave him some work to do that he could channel his skills into being about productively, instead of unproductively as in Egypt with his anger.

Lent gives us time to pause, to reflect on how we are doing at meeting God, listening to what we hear read from the Bible, preached in the church and nudge to take seriously in the living out of our lives; the Spirit using our abilities for kingdom work here and now.

Though God doesn't make God-self known to many of us abruptly, that doesn't mean isn't present constantly. It does mean we should make space to listen, hear, and be moved for the sake of our life's health and that of God's kingdom in the here and now.

Let's hear the Word, be rescued for the sake of Grace and Mercy, and productively honor our maker with this gift of life, standing up for justice and human rights!

– *Andrew Borden*

Sunday, March 10, 2019

The Constancy of Spirit

Luke 4:1-13

Perhaps you missed the Ash Wednesday service — the kids had a game, a practice, or you just needed the night at home. Relax. This first Sunday in Lent can be your starting gate to this new season.

Jesus was starting out, too. Fresh from his baptism, Jesus begins with a retreat, to the wilderness, without food or water. Frequently, these experiences of initiation are designed first not to build one up, but to deconstruct. Gains in the spiritual world rarely come from our successes but from some kind of suffering. It seems that vulnerability and the bottom have as much or more to teach us than our self-sufficiency at the top.

Jesus is made vulnerable physically, emotionally, and spiritually. But he is not without important assets: the Spirit and the gift of prayer. In the gospel of Luke particularly, nothing happens without the Spirit and prayer. The Spirit is the initiator and driver of all action. The Spirit is there at his baptism. The Spirit goes with him into the desert. The Spirit is on Jesus as he gives testimony to his vocation and calling in his first sermon at the synagogue in Nazareth.

This is a good place for us to start as well — in the assurance of the constancy of the Holy Spirit and the gift of prayer where we may dwell and receive the strength and courage required for our journey. The Spirit and prayer are great Lenten companions.

– *Mark Nilson*

Wednesday, March 13, 2019

Luke 21:34 - 22:6

Be on guard that our hearts are not weighed down with worries, through loss of our faith, through neglect, or that we break up and drive off that which we need to pay close attention to. The author of Luke urgently cautions us to watch all that is happening around us, that evil does not catch us unaware.

We need to be aware of God's presence with us, always. That we prayerfully ask God to protect and lead us from all temptation counter to God's WAY of life for us and to believe God will not let us down. If God be for us, who can be against us?

God has never let me down, even during many extremely difficult times in my life. All I ever need to do is say from my heart, "God, please help me," and I feel God's presence with me. I have let God down, but God has never let me down. Not even once. I also remember to tell God, "Not my will, but thy will be done."

In the reading of this Gospel of Luke, we remember the Festival of Passover. During this time, Satan entered Judas Iscariot, one of Jesus' disciples joining the plot to kill Jesus, God's beloved son, just for the temporary gratification of receiving money.

We need to remember what is most important in our lives and try to follow Jesus' teaching, always. Satan is still alive today, constantly testing our faith. We need to remember God is, and always will be, stronger than evil. Amen.

– *Roberta Briggs*

Old Man Advice

Psalm 27

The 27th Psalm was a gift given to me by an old preacher at a particularly vulnerable spot early in my ministry. I had phoned him first thing in the morning with my concerns, and he invited me to stop by to talk things through. Barely into the front hall of his small cottage, he stood before me, placing both hands on my shoulders, raising me up in confidence, and began:

The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear?

The Lord is the stronghold of my life; of whom shall I be afraid?

I will never forget that moment, and I have returned to it thousands of times when I have needed to be buoyed up in the midst of some crisis, or when I have prayed for another who, in the midst of trouble, needed some word to stand on.

Psalm 27 is a hymn of confidence. We are encouraged to name off foes, enemies, threats that all stand against us — agents that wish to do us in. But the cadence and power of those first few lines set us back on firm ground. The Lord is LIGHT, SALVATION, STRONGHOLD. As the psalmist says a couple of iterations earlier: “God is my shepherd! I don’t need a thing.” Psalm 23:1

As we head into the second week of Lent, perhaps we are noticing that all is not well in our worlds. Trouble persists. Threats keep coming. Fear is still a constant companion. Psalm 27 does not run from reality but keeps beckoning for God’s help. Look again at verses 7, 9, 11 and 12:

Hear, be gracious, answer

turn not, cast me not off

teach, lead, give me not up

The speaker sticks with God — God sticks with the speaker.

We end with the same power we began:

Wait for the Lord; be strong, and let your heart take courage;

Wait for the Lord.

This is great “old man advice.” I will treasure it forever.

— Mark Nilson

Monday, March 18, 2019

Romans 4:1-12

Faith is a gift from God. We do nothing to earn it. At baptism, the Holy Spirit brings the kernel of faith to the candidate, who is seeded with this blessing, and the candidate's family, friends, and church community are admonished to help the candidate come to understand, appreciate, and live into the gift of faith.

Behind this is God's hope for each of us that we understand nothing we could ever do would make us worthy of GOD's love and gift of faith. But through us engaging through the gift of faith, the Grace and Mercy that are God meet us as we are, where we are, loving and persisting for our success and hopefulness in life.

In light of the seemingly endless list of challenges we encounter walking the road of life, this gift is a phenomenal thing. The road isn't paved with tests or obstacles from God, but because we are each given free will, other people's bad actions can affect us, we can also be our own worst enemy when we depart from following God through faith, and the weather on our planet can be temperamental as this delicate orb moves through its phases of balancing all the inputs nature and our human intervention throw at it.

Let us trust God, this gift of faith, and permit the Spirit's intervention with us that can help us destress and remain hopeful and appreciative of life.

– *Andrew Borden*

Saturday, March 23, 2019

Parched

Psalm 63:1-8

The first verse of Psalm 63 is very familiar to me. As a practitioner of yoga and daily meditation, I have used this verse often and repetitively to begin my yoga practice. As I repeat the words, hopefully I can settle into a meditative state.

When I began a study of the Psalms, I learned that Psalm 63 was a lament. Did I really want to begin my meditation with an expression of sorrow and mourning? But as I delved deeper into this book of poems and songs, I learned that the Psalms go from lament to praise, which leads to faith and hope. As we read on to verses 6-8, we begin to see this faith and hope as David sings for joy in the “watches” of the night. We are told that the night was divided into three “watches.” How many times have we awakened during our “watches” trusting that God upholds and keeps us in the shadow of His wings?

In the King James version of the Bible, the word “early” is used before “I seek Thee” in the first verse. Let us, therefore, arise “early” to delight in God’s presence in our lives.

– Jackie Walsh

How Transient Is My Life?

Psalm 39:4-5

“ Lord make me know my end and what is the measure of my days; let me know how fleeting I am! Behold, you have made my days a few handbreadths, and my lifetime is as nothing before you. Surely all mankind stands as a mere breath!”

We hear the same lament in Psalm 39 as we do in the book of Job: “Why do you afflict me when my life is so brief?” We all suffer at times in this life. What lessons do we learn when we suffer, and how do we respond when life is in our favor? When we, like David, seek from God reminders of the brevity of our lives, we realize that our time here on Earth and all we amass in material things are like breath on a frosty morn; it is there for but a moment, and then it is gone from sight. Life is transient in view of eternity, and death will come to all, certain and unexpected.

Knowing how brief our time is, how do we live our lives? Living for the Lord, it is the only option with eternal hope. From Psalm 37:3-4, we read: “Trust in the Lord and do good. Then you will live safely in the land and prosper. Take delight in the Lord, and he will give you your heart’s desires.” We read further from Matthew 6:19-21, as Jesus says, “Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal, but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”

Our hope is in the Lord, and not in the world, for worldly things will fade. We need to be careful in the things we do and say; we should pursue holiness, for in this way we bring glory to God’s name.

If today should be my last day, I will live it for the Lord. Amen.

– *Marie Sturdevant*

Saturday, March 30, 2019

Parables of Grace and Celebration

Luke 15:1-10

This is that remarkable section of scripture where Luke puts together, in rapid-fire succession, three parables of grace: The Lost Sheep, The Lost Coin, and The Lost Son.

What speaks to me at this mid-Lenten point is its focus on the “one” and the theme of loss and recovery. It is placed by Luke in a broader section focused on the gospel for the outcasts. Luke is a gospel of presence. It has long been thought of as a gospel of ‘withness’, as it places Jesus with the people. It contains the bulk of Jesus’ teaching, and in many ways, it is the heart of the whole Gospel.

Jesus’ relationship with outcasts, the toll collectors and sinners, is “the surest — and to the religious authorities most unacceptable — feature of his ministry.” This is what Jesus was about. He understood his whole mission to be about seeking and saving the lost. And to Jesus, this kind of ministry, focusing on the compassion of God, brought about great celebration. The three parables in chapter 15 encourage those who have “ears to hear” to join in the rejoicing of God in the recovery of his treasured ones.

What is so intriguing is that all this celebrating into which Jesus invites us is set in the midst of “grumbling.” The Pharisees and the religious authorities were grumbling about “who” Jesus was spending time with. There is “grumbling” when people find out that Jesus will dine with Zacchaeus. The elder brother was caught up in his internal “grumbling” at the return of his wayward brother.

How often are we caught up in our own grumbling when we see and hear the returning of those once lost? Does this keep us from the great banquet? What must I lose to be found again? After all, these are parables of grace.

— *Mark Nilson*

Tuesday, April 2, 2019

Psalm 53

I love the science fiction television show Doctor Who. The basic premise is that there is a Time Lord called the Doctor who travels through space and time in his blue police box.

Obviously, it's more complicated, with regeneration and various companion travelers, but it's a show that's been on for 50 years and would take a while to fully explain.

As with most stories, a lot of episodes focus on good vs. evil. The Doctor is always on the right side, usually trying to save the world while also converting the bad guys. He's against useless killings and rarely uses violence, no matter how evil his enemy is. Like Jesus, he prefers to use his words rather than weapons.

The first time I read Psalm 53, I thought wow, David needs to talk to the Doctor if that's how he thinks things work. David is talking about the second destruction of the Temple and painting a pretty bleak picture with the dichotomy of the chosen and the damned. Some people, even today, view the world in this way; the faithful people up on their pedestal and the immoral sinners burning below. Our God would not treat anyone this way. Jesus, like the Doctor, teaches us to love our enemies. It's as simple as that.

*God, thank you for loving us and showing us how important it is to love others.
Help us share that love, not only with friends, but also with enemies. Amen.*

– Stephanie Harms

Sunday, April 7, 2019

John 12:1-8

Life rolls out pretty fast for us. I mean, how often have we either caught ourselves saying, or heard someone exclaim, “I lost track of time!”

With a fast-paced existence due to responsibilities and other people’s expectations, we can miss things along the way that are important if we’re not careful.

Mary obviously had a firm grasp of just who Jesus was. And this comprehension moved her to honor our Lord with an anointing of perfume; her way of honoring the Grace that is God meeting her, and all of us, on the ground where we are, to help us not be overcome by ourselves.

Judas was overcome by many opinions and weaknesses, and he did not see God in the person of Jesus and appreciate what was unfolding before his eyes. His actions and responses bear this out.

Perhaps if we can slow down and make time for God, we might meet God more often and appreciate the Grace reaching out to meet us.

Let us give thanks and honor the One who walked among us and mature in the faith.

– *Andrew Borden*

Friday, April 12, 2019

Psalm 31:9-16; Isaiah 54:9-10

So here we are, a little bit earthbound and a little bit heavenly conscious. Now here, also, is Jesus, totally heavenly conscious and completely “getting” us in our earthbound perceptions. How? Why?

Well, we accept that God is Love and that Love never fails. Do we? Do we really? In Divine Love, he “came down,” entered in, took on our “flesh,” “sin,” sense of separateness. In Divine Love he endured. In the Supreme Power of Divine Love he is victorious. Always.

In Him, with Him, through Him in the Unity of the Holy Spirit, our old liturgy sings.

The Way of Grace and Mercy in Love sounds pretty heavenly minded to me, like walking “on through the wind, on through the rain, though our dreams be tossed and blown. Walk on, walk on, with hope in your heart, and you’ll never walk alone. You’ll never walk alone,” courtesy of Rodgers and Hammerstein, paraphrased.

So may it ever be.

– Pam Sutton

Sunday, April 14, 2019

Two Parades

Luke 19:28-40

Things are really moving now. The events in Bethany have really accelerated this Jerusalem journey. What had happened in Bethany was the raising of Lazarus, and when the religious authorities saw what had happened, well, that was the last straw. Something had to happen to contain what would surely be news that would go viral.

It's important to know that there was not just one parade that day, but two. The parade that we read about in today's text is largely a peasant parade. It was the beginning of the week of Passover, the most sacred week of the Jewish year. Jerusalem's numbers swelled as Jews from all over the region fled into the city. Jesus entered from the east, rode a donkey, and descended down the Mount of Olives. Before he would reach the city gates, he would pass ancient olive groves. Later in the week, he shall spend a night in prayer in those gardens. But Jesus would enter through the Golden Gate. It is the gate that it is anticipated that the coming Messiah would enter through.

But on the opposite side of town there was, not a peasant parade, but an imperial one. Pontius Pilate rode into town with his cavalry, soldiers, and a show of power. Listen to how Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan describe Pilate's arrival in Jerusalem:

A visual panoply of imperial power: cavalry on horses, foot soldiers, leather armor, helmets, weapons, banners, golden eagles mounted on poles, sun glinting on metal and gold. Sounds: the marching of feet, the creaking of leather, the clinking of bridles, the beating of drums. The swirling of dust. The eyes of silent onlookers, some curious, some awed, some resentful.

There is not one parade but two. The question, of course, at this late point in the season, is what parade are you part of: the peasant parade or the imperial one? It may not be as easy an answer as one thinks.

– Mark Nilson

Wednesday, April 17, 2019

John 13:21-32

Many people would not let someone get away who might be a danger to them, if they had access to a way from preventing it. Jesus certainly could have called upon the other 11 disciples to detain and “take care” of Judas so he couldn’t be a problem. But Jesus didn’t act, except to encourage Judas in hurrying on his way to turn him in.

This smacks up against our human sensibilities; it just doesn’t seem to make any rational sense. Yet that is exactly the point: God, Jesus as Emanuel (God with us), is not like us. And thanks be to God for that!

There was a new covenant plan for us in play, and it had to run its course, even if it was going to cause grief and pain along the way.

It can be hard for us to decouple, disengage from world opinion, community mind-sets, even perceived family expectations, but to follow the WAY of Jesus, God’s WAY for us, means just that: letting the Grace that is God play out in and through us, which leads to full life.

The death of Jesus on the cross proves God’s determination to never leave us, to persist in being Grace and Mercy for our sake: the human “machine” could not overcome the Divine.

Let us trust this Love come down for us that permeates all of creation, ready to move all who permit the Holy working in us.

– *Andrew Borden*

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