

St James United Church

Message for March 6, 2022

First Sunday in Lent



“Wrestling with Meaning”

- Preached by Rev. James Ravenscroft

Readings: Deuteronomy 26:1-11; Luke 4:1-13; Excerpt from *Seven Storey Mountain* by Thomas Merton

On Wednesday we began Lent, a time of fasting and prayer that Christians have marked for nearly as long as there have been Christians. Originally a short time of spiritual preparation for catechumens (adults getting ready to be baptized), over time it was extended to forty days as not only catechumens but penitents (adults who wanted to return to their faith after renouncing it during persecution) symbolically shared in Jesus’ time in the wilderness, and then beyond just those two groups to every Christian preparing spiritually for the great feast of Easter.

As many of you know by experience, marking Lent may be an ancient Christian practice, but it’s relatively new in the United Church, evident in how some people take something on instead of give something up as traditionally done. This year I’ve added a time of spiritual reading to my daily prayer. I hope some of you are adding prayer to your routines as well. We’ve themed this Lent as “40 Days of Contemplation and Action”, not just encouraging use of the Social & Eco Action Committee’s awareness calendars but including mini-spiritual practices each Sunday and having an extended version of it as part of our Wednesday lunch-time communion services.

I give things up too, but to open myself spiritually, fasting as an extension of prayer. Sometimes fasting has an ascetic element to it, as if we don’t just seek to grow closer to Jesus by modelling his practice but to suffer like he did. Perhaps this comes from penitents joining this preparation time alongside catechumens. Their inclusion is likely why there’s such a confessional tone to the season with ministers, me included, who don’t include prayers of confession in services much of the year being sure to have them during Lent. For me it’s tough not to take today’s gospel text to heart. I know too well that unlike Jesus I’d cave at the first temptation and turn rocks into bread let alone jump from the Temple or honour the devil to gain access to wealth and power.

But I struggle here, not in how we tell the story of Jesus refuting the devil, but interpret Exodus, retold in Deuteronomy. In Lent we recall not just Jesus’ forty day fast but how his fast echoed his ancestors forty-year sojourn in the wilderness. The trouble is we link it with their worship of a golden calf while Moses was on Mt. Sinai, the years of wandering seen as punishment for not leaving the “sins” of Egypt behind. That interpretation reminds me how easily we judge others, and judge ourselves. It’s why I stopped including prayers of confession in services except at Lent. In my years as a priest, I heard too many confessions mired in self-hatred and shame. The same people came to confession every week, feeling unworthy to share communion otherwise.

Not too long ago in Methodist churches in Newfoundland, only the minister and one other person took part in communion for the same reason. It's rooted in a negative rather than positive view of our experience, something I hear as Thomas Merton reflects on why some reject the existence of God. In all of this we are quick to emphasise our sinfulness rather than to lift up God's grace.

But should we? While it's true that Lent developed as a time of spiritual preparation before our baptism, Jesus went to the wilderness after his, needing forty days to reflect on what it meant to be affirmed as God's child. Similarly, the Israelites were led out of Egypt, via a baptism of sorts as they passed through the sea, because God heard their cries, honouring their relationship from the time of Abraham and Sarah. They needed a generation to shake off feelings of shame and to let what it meant to be God's children take hold of their hearts and shape how they lived.

For me, this is what Lent is about, a time of reflection and prayer as we come to appreciate what it means to be daughters and sons of God. And we need to take forty days. Did you know that in Jewish thought forty signifies completeness and transition? We mark forty days as we move to a new stage of life having completed what was needed in the former. There's a letting go, but not from judgment or shame. It's like a seed releasing its shell to become a seedling. Many people have an identity crisis in their forties. Until then we're growing as individuals, a process that began when as babies we realized mom wasn't just an extension of ourselves. Over time our identity strengthens, and as teens and younger adults our identity is particularly tied to how others see us, defining ourselves externally. Culturally this is encouraged well past our forties, many of us in the West identifying with what we own or wear, what we drive, where we live, and especially what we do.

Looking at the temptations in this context, we see the devil trying to keep Jesus defining himself by the values of the world - access to material comfort, power, fame, success. But following his baptism, Jesus knew he needed to let that go, fasting as a way to open up space within himself as he focused on his relationship with God. Elsewhere in his writings, Merton said we're like the invisible man when we define ourselves by externals, wrapping ourselves in bandages to be seen. We see this at play in the war in Ukraine and the rhetoric around it. The problem is, external markers like wealth, jobs, power aren't the true self. It's found as we move inward and experience God at our heart, realize we're God's children, sparks of the divine flame and held in God's grace. With that clarity we don't shame ourselves as sinners, even as we're honest about what we've done, including how we're part of sinful systems that have brought the world to the brink. Our life task is to embrace what it means for each of us to be God's children and act accordingly, to love rather than hate, to include others not isolate them.

Lent is still about preparing for Easter, still about spending time in the wilderness with Jesus, even still about letting go, but it is a letting go to make room for a new identity, and so very much grounded in prayer. I pray these "40 Days of Contemplation and Action" will be just that, as we ponder what it means to be children of God, not just this coming Easter but always. Amen.