

For Lent I. 2/22/2015

Genesis 9:8-17; Psalm 25:1-9; 1 Peter 3:18-22; Mark 1:9-15

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A Good Lent

Lord, let words sprung from this week tongue
And our heart's meditations
O, Saving Might, Lord, in thy sight,
Receive good acceptance.
And let my weak words be servants of the Living Word
And let the Living Word live here, with us,
Today,
Amen.

The first Sunday of Lent. How is that working out for you? Are you having a good Lent? Of all the seasons on the Church Calendar, this one is often celebrated with less enthusiasm than some of the others. Although it may be enjoying something of a resurgence these days. I learned last week that certain Muslim communities are observing Lent as an act of solidarity with their Christian neighbors and to counter act some of the horrors done in the name of Islam. Still, Fat Tuesday (Mardi Gras) is pretty fat and Ash Wednesday is usually lean. Yet Lent it is one of the most important periods of our Liturgical Year. It is packed with as much symbolism and meaning as any of the other chapters in the Christian Story. It is that time in which we are asked to use our imaginations and our hearts to experience a little of what Jesus experienced when he spent forty days in the wilderness. I especially like Mark's account of those forty days because he takes the trouble to acknowledge the wild beasts. He mentions them right in between the Satan and with the angels. (Mark doesn't say whether the beasts were on the side of the angels, or part of the temptation, but I like the idea that they were somehow involved in the process.) Also, during these times, we are asked to use our God-given imaginations to enter, in some small way, into the minds and emotions of the disciples and of Jesus (to the degree that we can) during those last few weeks when Christ set his face towards Jerusalem, and then marched up Mount Calvary to save the universe. Having a deeper experience of Lent will give us a deeper experience of all the other more celebrated parts of the Christian year. My remarks this morning will try to make a small contribution towards deepening this experience for us all.

Growing up Baptist meant we that didn't "do Lent", but I had Catholic friends who did, and all I got out of it was that you had to stop doing one of your favorite bad habit or give up eating something that you really liked. Broccoli or spinach didn't really cut as a sacrificial material; it had to be along the lines of cake and ice-cream. Us Baptist folks kinda scratched out chins and raised an eyebrow and said (in effect) "Ya'll can keep your Lent, we'll just take the cake." But, during my rather extended and meandering journey in the spiritual wilderness, I began to appreciate the value, and importance, and beauty of Liturgy, and I was especially drawn to the

Yearly Liturgical Calendar. As Baptists we had Christmas and Easter and we were more or less on our own after that. It became quite appealing to me to be able to live through the whole year while under the canopy of the entire Christian Story. It was wonderful to think that no matter what day of the year I happened to wake up I had a season to celebrate, and some saint or other notable person that I could honor. I was especially attracted to Lent because it seemed rather exotic to me and it was supposed to be hard. It appealed, I suppose, to my athletic or competitive instincts.

But being a rather hardheaded individual, I tried, for a while, to "live Liturgically" on my own. And being a bookish person I started gathering some literature. For show and tell this morning I brought a reprint of the 1559 edition of the Book of Common Prayer. It claims to be the one Queen Elizabeth used. I can't now recall my exact motivation for wanting this particular acquisition except that I wanted to enter, somehow, into a "Liturgical Lifestyle." But I knew in my heart that the Lone Ranger approach wasn't ultimately going to work. I needed a community. It seems that ideally does "take a village". So, after some more meandering,! eventually I made my way here and said, in effect, "Would ya'll like to be my village?" Of course, it's better to say, "May I please be a part of your village." So, here I endeavor, with you, to live a Liturgical life of which Lent is an important part.

A few years back I went on to the Google-sphere to research Lent a little and a certain blogger finished his remarks by saying "I had a good Lent". That phrase has lingered in my mind ever since; what is a good Lent? How does one go about having a "good Lent?" Merry Christmases we know, and we have an idea of what a Happy New Year is, but a good Lent is more rare and perhaps even more important.

With that in mind, I have a modest proposal. We can approach Lent negatively, the "via negativa" in which you give something up; a bad habit (or something delicious). But we can also use the positive approach. A good Lent probably has a little of both. My own "via negativa" has already been decided, or I should say decided for me. My wife and I were discussing Lent the other day and she suggested, in her own endearing way, that I give up beer for Lent, only she didn't say beer, she said "cervesa". I am quite fond of my wife's endearments, so I said "OK". My only excuse is that it seemed like a good idea at the time. I am now five days in to Lent...and I'm hanging in there. I got her back thought, she gave up Pepsi. And she likes them so much, her via negativa may be harder than mine. But I will leave you to your own devices for your via negativa (far be it from me to suggest that anyone give up beer, or Pepsi). My modest suggestion is on the positive side. It is quite simple. It may seem too simple or too easy for some, but I'd like to propose that for the remaining 36 days of Lent (which does not include Sundays) we incorporate the Lord's Prayer more deeply into our daily lives.

We Episcopalians, along with others live under the canopy of the Liturgical Calendar, and we celebrate weekly the Lord's Supper in the context of the story of the Creation and the Redemption of the Cosmos. Communion with God in the bread and the wine and reliving this story is also our Liturgy. The Lord's Supper and the Lord's Prayer is our Liturgical bedrock. So I propose, as a part of this season that we take just a closer walk with this Liturgical rock, from which we are hewn, for this is the prayer that our Lord has taught us to pray. You might like to say it alone or

with family at meals, or with a friend, aloud or quietly in your heart, at morning, noon, or night, or all day long if you like. But probably just once a day would be the best place to begin.

And I'd like to further suggest that we do this with a couple of things in mind. Let us examine, more closely than usual, the depth of its meaning. In a few minutes we will say The Lord's Prayer together and today millions of Christians world-wide will also say this prayer. In this prayer the entire body of Christ through all ages is knit together in one united worshipful utterance. We will bathe ourselves in its beauty and its poetry, and the sheer music of it. But we do not say the prayer because of its beauty or its poetry or its music. The Lord's Prayer is the bedrock of our Liturgy because of its meaning.

Consider, for just example, some of the fuller implications of addressing our God as "Father". What does it mean that the maker of all that is (and Jim Jerrell, our resident astronomer will tell you that there is a whole lot of "is" out there) consider what it means that the "Maker of Heaven and Earth" wants to relate to you as a "daughter" or, "son". This past Wednesday Father Dave put ash on our fore heads in the sign of the cross and said, "Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return." There is no truer statement in all of scripture. We are tiny specks of dust, on another tiny speck of dust we call Earth, spinning about in a minor galaxy in the back-waters of an all but infinite and ever expanding universe. And yet Jesus Christ our Lord has taught us that when we address the principality, and the power, and the glory, and the Creator of all that is, we are to say "Our Father". You could think for a long, long, long time about that and not begin to plumb the depths of its meaning. I have been thinking about it for a good part of my life and I still can't quite wrap my mind around it (and by God's grace I never will).

But as we think these elevated thoughts, let's not forget the marvelous practicality of this prayer. Back when I had a real job I spent many hours in rush hour traffic on the freeway just getting to work, and an equal number making my way home. There is probably no better laboratory on earth in which to practice forgiving those who trespass against us, or who look like they might want to. Among its many blessings, our Lord's Prayer helps us meet the challenges of our day, whether they be tragic or trivial.

Some of you may not feel challenged by this. You may already be accustomed to saying daily prayers. So for you hot shots I have an extra credit assignment. Get yourself a little note-book and a pen and write just a sentence or two about how the Lord's Prayer makes a difference in your life, or some more general, personal reflection on your life with God. If you get carried away and start writing pages and pages, that's OK, no points will be deducted for enthusiasm, but a sentence or two will probably be sufficient. It could be something as simple as, "I was a little bit less stressed out than usual on the freeway this morning." You get the idea.

If you decide to go for the extra credit, let me share three quick pointers that may be helpful. First of all, try not to be too literary. God is not overly concerned with spelling, punctuation and grammar. Try to let the words just flow. Secondly, try not to be too religious. God loves everybody, but God is especially fond of sinners. Its fine to put your best foot forward on Sunday morning, but God wants a relationship with you the rest of the week too. So, in your journal try to be a little less religious and a little more real. God has a bias towards honesty.

Finally, if you give this a try, you will probably discover that consistency in journal keeping is not always easy. If things don't go exactly as planned, that's a good time to learn the fine art of giving you self a break. For this proposal, perfection is not required, and not expected. Perfection is fine, if you are one of the chosen few, but persistence is better. In the martial art that I practice, we have a saying, "Fall down seven times, get up eight." The more practiced you are at giving yourself a break when you fall down, the more likely you will be to get up and try again, (and again, and again).

This little idea is suggested, not to place yet another layer of obligation on your shoulders. I know we are all busy people, and you may already have a full plate of Lent. And no one needs yet another reason to feel guilty. But if this resonates, I hope you will consider it (with or without the extra credit). It is proposed in the interest of a good Lent.

But as I come to a close, I realize I still haven't given an adequate definition of what a good Lent is. Among the manly blessings of Liturgy is that it defines us, both as individuals and as a member of a larger body. We, the people of the Jesus Way are defined, most clearly and most profoundly by Easter, possibly even more than at Advent and Christmas. Without Easter, none of the rest of the Christian Story is possible. And Lent is our period of preparation. I hope you won't think me irreverent when I describe it as a "spiritual boot camp". Lent, in spite of its importance, has no intrinsic value. It is that time in the Liturgical year when we get ready for what happens next. Athletes don't go into a training camp to go into a training camp. They go into training to prepare for the big game. For us, the people of the Jesus Way, our "Big Game" begins on Easter Morning. Let me define a good Lent then, as one in which we become a little bit better prepared than to receive the full impact of what comes next.

Because, for us, what happens next changes everything. What happens next turns the world upside down, what happens next is what turns your lives inside out, what happens next transforms the entire universe from darkness to light. We move from a cold, cruel, heartless, meaningless existence, to life; we are transformed from existing to living, a life full of light, and hope, and love, and joy, and purpose. What happens next changes everything.

So, let us prepare.

As I began, I'd like also to close with a prayer:

Heavenly Father,
Father of our days and of our nights,
Father of our joys and the comfort in our deepest
sorrows; Thy Kingdom Come, Thy Will Be Done on earth,
and in our hearts, and in our village
help us to better prepared during this season for What Comes Next,
For Thine is the Kingdom, and the Power, and the Glory for ever and ever.
Amen.