

First Sunday of Lent: February 21, 2021

Sermon: Rev. Carol Ruthven

An Invitation to a Deeper Lent

“To you, O Lord, I lift up my soul. O my God, in you I trust.” (Psalm 25:1-2).

Perhaps you're like a lot of people who are feeling emotionally weighed down by COVID-fatigue. The first six weeks of this year felt an awful lot like last year. It's as if we've been living in a whole year of Lenten sacrifice with a deep awareness of human sinfulness, death and dying, and suffering and loss. If part of the observance of Lent is about sacrifice in preparation for Easter, we've all made a lot of sacrifices. As a parish family, we've all had to give up in-person worship services and being nourished spiritually with the weekly sacrament of Holy Communion. We've had to learn how to transition to virtual worship services and meet for Bible Study, coffee fellowship and church committees via Zoom. A year ago probably no one heard the word “zoom” unless someone was talking about speeding down a highway; now Zoom is a household word and has a new meaning.

We've had to give up planned vacations, visiting with our parents, grandparents or grandchildren; and doing many of the things that give us great joy. Many people have had their businesses interrupted; teachers and students have had to transition to virtual learning with a steep learning curve for everyone; and millions of people have lost their jobs and the economic security and health care that came with that employment. It's been painful to see how the pandemic has been especially harsh in affecting people who are impoverished and for racial minorities. Perhaps the hardest thing of all is the ongoing daily news of the heart-breaking statistics of people who have died from the coronavirus. At times, it seems that there is too much suffering, pain and loss for us to comprehend. We're searching for ways to carry on even in the midst of continued uncertainty.

We're being invited into a Lent in the midst of our lenten living of the past year. We need to grieve all of the losses we've suffered because this grieving will help facilitate healing. Perhaps this year we're being called into a deeper Lent; one not just of personal sacrifice and spiritual disciplines, but a deeper Lent that draw us closer to God and to one another. We're being called to be intentional in pursuing a more faithful walk of discipleship in which we all work together to build God's dream of the beloved community in which there is peace, justice, and opportunity for all human beings.¹

An invitation into a deeper Lent is all about making way for new life for us and others as faithful Christians. It's about making way for new life by turning our lives around so they're focused on our relationship with God and with one another. As baptized Christians we're blessed to be in a covenantal relationship with God. In our reading from Genesis, we look back

to the ancient covenant between God and Noah. By allowing Noah to pass through the waters of the great flood, God renewed his covenantal relationship with Noah and this was symbolized by a rainbow. The intent of that covenantal relationship was to protect all forms of life on earth and all persons created by God and to do so for all future generations. God's people had been unfaithful and had rebelled against God's commandments. Noah's flood symbolized a baptism that involved the death of a previous life characterized by evil and sinfulness and the beginning of a new life based on faithfulness to God.

In the Gospel of Mark, we learn about Jesus passing through the waters of the River Jordan at his baptism. In the same way that the protection of Noah and God's people in the Ark marked the beginning of a new life, Jesus' baptism by John marked the beginning of Jesus' ministry that would bring new life and Good News to all of God's people.

We might ask why Jesus, who was sinless, needed to be baptized at all. In asking John to baptize him, Jesus was making a public commitment to follow the way of life that John had been preaching. By freely choosing John's baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, Jesus began his public ministry by practicing what he would go on to preach. Jesus embodied perfectly John's call to repent from the sins of the world. This repentance involved the death of a life of temptation and sin and the emergency of a new life based on living the way God intends us to live.

At the time of our baptism, we too symbolically pass through the waters. In biblical imagery, water symbolizes the cleansing from sin and new birth that comes through our relationship with God.ⁱⁱ The sacrament of baptism is in a way an anointing of us to step out with Christ to serve others. "Our baptism immerses us in the affairs of our neighborhood, our nation, our world. It marks us for ministry in the name of Christ's love, with justice and peace for all." In this way, we are called to work together to build God's dream of the beloved community. This at times seems like a daunting challenge. With all of the political, economic, and health challenges we face and brokenness in our world, it can feel like we're wondering in a wilderness.

After Jesus' baptism, he was immediately driven out into the wilderness for forty days where he was tempted by Satan. Forty days is biblical shorthand for saying "a long time." Mark tells us that the angels ministered to Jesus in the wilderness. The Greek word for ministered used here is a verb used in the imperfect tense which suggests that the angels ministered to Jesus over a prolonged period of time (Mark 1:13). This reminds us that we're never abandoned by God. This is the Good News we need to hold onto. In the trials and tribulations we're experiencing, God will never abandon us. In the same way that Jesus was protected by angels sent by God when he was alone in the wilderness, we're also protected by the ministering and sustaining presence of God.

The psalmist reminds us that "All the paths of the Lord are love and faithfulness to those who keep his covenant." (Psalm 25-9) We take our fears and troubles to God, trusting that God is our refuge and salvation. We lean on God for strength when we're feeling weary and

discouraged. We lift up all our concerns to God trusting that God hears our pleas and understands our concerns even before the words of our prayers leave our lips. We respond with great love to help others knowing that God first loved us. We hope for a better future for all people knowing all that God can make possible. We commit to faithfully journey through Lent knowing that the promise of new life awaits all of us with the arrival of Easter. Amen.

ⁱ Jim Rice quoted in Adam Russell Taylor, "This Year is Dark, But We Will Still Need Lent, February 17, 2021, Sojourner's Magazine, <https://sojo.net/articles/year-dark-we-still-need-lent>

ⁱⁱ Joseph P. Russell, The Season of Lent, First Sunday in Lent, p. 212.