

God wants to free us from our sins

Sermon preached at the church of St. Peter & St. Paul, Marietta, GA

by The Rev. Thomas C. Pumphrey, February 18, 2018

First Sunday of Lent (year B): 1 Peter 3:18-22, Mark 1:9-15

1 Peter 3:18-22 (NRSV): *Christ also suffered for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, in order to bring you to God. He was put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit, in which also he went and made a proclamation to the spirits in prison, who in former times did not obey, when God waited patiently in the days of Noah, during the building of the ark, in which a few, that is, eight persons, were saved through water. And baptism, which this prefigured, now saves you-- not as a removal of dirt from the body, but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers made subject to him.*

Mark 1:9-15(NRSV): *In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him. Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news."*

Today is the first Sunday in the season of Lent. We began Lent this past Ash Wednesday as we took stock of our mortality, took time to grieve our sins and set our hearts toward God. Lent is a season of preparation for the Feast of the Resurrection of Jesus at Easter. Lent is a season of penitence, of self-examination and repentance, turning away from sin and temptation and turning toward God again. In Lent we practice self-denial as a means to surrender to God. Lent is not about self-loathing. No, we can repent of self-loathing as well. Lent is a blessing—an opportunity to open more of ourselves to God’s grace. God want to set us free from our sins.

The journey of Lent parallels other wilderness journeys. For some reason, God’s people often seem to benefit from time in the wilderness. The Children of Israel journeyed in the wilderness before coming to the promised land. David spent time in the wilderness as a fugitive from King Saul. The Prophet Elijah lived in the wilderness before returning to speak out against King Ahab. Even Jesus journeyed in the wilderness. Each Lent begins with Jesus’ journey. Mark gives us the shortest version. Jesus was baptized, then immediately driven by the Holy Spirit into the wilderness, where he was tempted. Only after this ordeal did Jesus’ ministry begin.

Our journey of Lent can be a time of wrestling: wresting with God and with ourselves and our temptations. Our bad habits have taken time to develop, and so it takes time to undo them from our lives. None of this sounds particularly appealing. We would rather be positive and upbeat and affirming of ourselves. But we know we need Lent. I think we need Lent because sin and evil is real and serious business. The problem of sin and evil is not just “out there,” but within us as well.

Our culture wants to claim that people are naturally good. But then we don’t know how to hold someone accountable when he does something really horrible. When we hear the news of yet another school shooting, we are left saying things like: “that is just inhuman” or “that person is just evil.” But the truth is that the problem of human evil is common to all of us. We hope that

we have trained ourselves to know the boundaries and to steer clear of that kind of evil. But sin has an insidious way of creeping in, and the last problem that we expect in ourselves is self-deception.

No, the problem of sin is not just “out there” in others, but inside as well—in our hearts. Left unchecked, sin can do enormous damage to others and to ourselves. So this process of self-examination and repentance is important. Just like King David and St. Peter, we all need a searching and fearless moral inventory. Christians practice penitence in all seasons, but especially in Lent. Self-examination is important for truth-telling accountability with God. Even Jesus wrestled with temptation, so it is no surprise that we would wrestle with temptation too, as long as we are willing to engage in that wrestling. The practice of Lenten penitence is a process of turning away from sin and temptation and turning toward God.

This accountability with God could make us fearful. But it should not be so. We may feel that way, but we do not need to feel fearful in bringing ourselves before God. This process is not opening ourselves to God’s punishment, but rather opening ourselves to God’s forgiveness, healing and renewal. Lent is not about self-improvement, but rather Lent is about opening ourselves to God’s redeeming work in us.

Long before I came to Georgia, I knew a man named Charlie.¹ Charlie was bright, talented and hard working in the pursuit of his career. Charlie was an ambitious financial planner, and he fit in well with a world that glorified the pursuit of self-interest. But his self-indulgence and pride caught up with him until his marriage unraveled and his career fell apart. Frustrated and angry, he faced the very real temptation of violence, lashing out and still unable to see his own role in his demise.

Somehow, God put someone in Charlie’s path at just that moment. He had a conversation of insight with a stranger in that moment of crisis. That stranger gave Charlie the most precious, life-giving gift he needed at that moment. He gave him the gift of accountability. He told Charlie the honest truth that he needed to change. And he told him that God is the only one who can bring about that change. Charlie could have ignored that message and gone his own way, but he didn’t. He made a different decision. The decision that made a difference in that moment was surrender: surrender to God.

With the security of God’s promise to him, Charlie’s self-examination that followed was a path of hope and renewal. When I met him, I knew who Charlie had become in Christ. He was a loving husband, a devoted father, and a generous Christian man. He was this kind of man not because of his own achievements, but because of God’s grace alive in him, at work in the wilderness, preparing him for the feast of reconciliation and renewal. Human evil had met the grace of God, and the grace of God prevailed.

When we engage in the journey of Lent, we do so because of the hope of God’s promise. God wants to free us from the trap of sin in our lives. God wants to untie us from the tangled messes we make for ourselves. God wants to reconcile us to him so that in renewed relationship with him, our lives might thrive and give life to those around us.

¹ Charlie has shared his story publicly, so I can share it with you.

We mark Jesus' suffering in Lent knowing, as we heard in First Peter today, that Jesus suffered in order to bring us to God. Jesus came to set us free—free from sin and free from the trap of self-deception, free to be closer to God, free to experience the blessings of God regardless of the wilderness around us. Lent is not an ending, but rather a response to Easter and a preparation for Easter. Knowing how much God loves us and wants to set us free from our sins, we engage in the practices of Lent because we know the blessings that God has in store for us as we do so. Then, when we come to Easter, we are even more prepared to rejoice in God's grace and mercy for us.

I invite you, therefore, to the observance of a Holy Lent, trusting in God's grace and seeking the joy of Easter.