



SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

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THE FIRST SUNDAY IN LENT, YEAR B, FEBRUARY 21, 2021
GENESIS 9:8-17; PSALM 25:1-9; MARK 1:9-15

THERE'S A RHYTHM

Mark: 1:9-15 *[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."]*

My birthday in mid-February often coincides with Lent; sometimes it's even on Ash Wednesday – truly a bummer. This year, though, I squeaked it out! My birthday was on Shrove Tuesday, the last day before Lent, and my husband Jim had delicious cake for me – because I am unabashedly a frosting fiend. And like many Christians, giving up treats is one of my traditional Lenten practices.

This is the first Sunday in Lent. I grew up in a family that took Lenten practice seriously, and it was very meaningful to me. There are six kids in my family. I'm number two; I have an older sister and four younger brothers,

generally each close in age to the next, with a bit wider gaps toward the end of the line. And we didn't eat meat on Fridays in our house, and we all pretty much gave up sweets, and we piled into the station wagon to go to Stations of the Cross at Holy Trinity on Friday evenings, including my grandfather who lived with us, and we went to confession together (eyeballing each other to see who seemed to be taking a looong time to say their imposed penance prayers).

Those traditions are both faith touchstones, and family-life-and-love touchstones for me. There's a rhythm to family life; there's a rhythm to the church's liturgical seasons;

there's a rhythm to the generations of human life.

So last week I got a birthday card from my beautiful youngest brother, Anthony. Handwritten, personal. In his note, a bit of which I quote with permission, he wrote, "As we get older, I'm more and more aware of how little time we have left all together, relatively speaking. It's a special time of our lives as siblings, and it's precious to me. I don't want to live it in anxiety that it will be all over at some point, but with awareness and honoring it."

Those words went straight to my heart. In this season of so much death and suffering in our nation and in the world, we don't take for granted that all six of us are still here, and someday, one of us will be the first to go and the others will grieve. And Anthony's the youngest; he's 13 years younger than I am. That's hard to think about, yet inevitable – and important – to think about sometimes, and, of course, inevitable to happen, as many of you know first-hand. On Ash Wednesday we said, "Remember that you are dust." It's in the rhythm of liturgy and the rhythm life, to take time to be mindful of death, and that mindfulness is healthy and helpful – and it is spiritual work. Because death precedes new life!

I think Anthony described Lent to us in his card to me: "As we get older, I'm more and more aware of how little time we have left all together, relatively speaking. It's a special time of our lives and it's precious to me. I don't want to live it in anxiety that it will be all over at some point, but with awareness and honoring it."

That *is* Lent. You don't have to be as old as I am to think about "as we get older." We all get older every day, and that is a gift of another day! But be aware and honor it. It: what is holy, what is love on this finite journey that entails loss – in this special and precious time of our lives, knowing that we're walking the road to Calvary with Jesus, and we're going to go to Good Friday with him, and to our own graves, someday, with him – AND we're going to rise with him at Easter.

Today, I have my five siblings, an incredible blessing in this era of loss. But I lost my mother and my son Pat way too young. I would never tell you that wasn't awful, isn't awful. But I **will** tell you: I will go where they are someday, because we're all on that journey. It doesn't end in death; it continues in resurrection.

I know that because of Jesus, Jesus who walked beside us, and told us, and showed us. *I go and prepare a place for you. (John 14:3) In*

my Father's house are many dwelling places (John 14:2).

The incarnate Jesus walked our full journey with us, joy AND pain, and passed through death on his journey, to bring us all to resurrection with him. That's why, in our prayer of Commemoration of the Dead, we pray, life is changed, not ended.

Mark's Gospel today read, When Jesus came out of his 40 days in the desert, he went about proclaiming: "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news."

"Repent" sounds ominous in our ears, but the Greek word, metanoia, in its simplest terms just means "change of mind." And repenting is also an action: it includes going forward doing better, a turning, a change of life. When we repent, we're really transforming our default setting about what's important.

So in Lent, we take these forty days, like Jesus' 40 days in the desert, to find quiet, to turn our attention inside, to notice and put aside temptations of life that would distract us from what is most important. That turning helps us to find the grounding within ourselves where we are connected with the Holy, and to pay attention there, as Anthony said, "with honoring and awareness." To be with Jesus there. To boldly ask ourselves, what is really

*important? Lent is a time to practice what we choose to die **to** – because of what we **gain** because of it.*

And so Lent is ultimately not all about what we give up; it's about what we gain. Whatever that practice looks like for you, if we pay attention to Jesus' Good News, that the kingdom of God has come near and we are part of it and have responsibility in it, if Lent reminds us, in its annual rhythm, to attentively put that at the center of our lives, it's ALL gain! Even remembering we will die, so every step of this journey is precious, even the hard parts, where we lose things. And that we're with Jesus and Jesus is with US, so it leads to resurrection.

Lent would be a grim business if it wasn't heading toward Easter! But death couldn't hold Jesus, and because of Jesus, it can't hold us. But it is part of our journey. Death-and-resurrection is part of the rhythm of the liturgical year (Lent, Easter); part of the rhythm of every Sunday Eucharist (on the night before he died, he took bread); part of the rhythm of the generations (my grandfather, my son, my daughter), part of the rhythm of every one of our lives (finite human, eternal Spirit).

When we come out of any "40 days of wilderness" – Lenten wilderness, or grief wilderness, or hard-times-in-our-lives

wilderness – we’ve got Jesus’ Good News to live and to share. Like Anthony, “I don’t want to live it in anxiety that it will be all over at some point, but with awareness and honoring it.” So let’s take advantage of this Lenten season and be mindful, and let’s share and act upon the Good News in this world with real intention.

Within our 40-day season, yes, there will be the cross and death. But at the end of it...the tomb will be empty, and the light will be dazzling!



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