



SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

THE VERY REV. STEVEN L. THOMASON, DEAN AND RECTOR
THE SECOND SUNDAY OF LENT, YEAR B, FEBRUARY 28, 2021
GENESIS 17:1-7, 15-16; PSALM 22:22-30; ROMANS 4:13-25; MARK 8:31-38

THE GRIEF AND MEANING OF LENT

Mark 8:31-38 [*Then Jesus began to teach his disciples that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. But turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, "Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things." He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? Indeed, what can they give in return for their life? Those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels."*]

Over the past ten days, since we began our Lenten journey in earnest once more, I've heard and read many people reflect that the past year has really been one long Lent...that the Lenten experience of last year, with its interposed exile from many familiar rhythms of life, including Church, never really ended.

I get that.

But these comments have also prompted me to wonder what is it that constitutes a Lenten experience for folks? Or to press a little further: what is the purpose of Lent during a

pandemic, and is there any wisdom to be gleaned from the unusually lengthy Lenten excursion?

Of course, a quick scan of the Christian tradition of Lent would derive some familiar touchstones—Lent is a time set apart for honing our spiritual senses to more acutely participate in resurrection joy when Easter arrives; or it serves as a time of preparation for those to be baptized and welcomed into the community; or in the call to Lenten fasting, prayer and almsgiving there is an

invitation to return to the spiritual proving grounds by which we come to more keenly know our belovedness.

All of these are present, year in and year out, in what we call the invitation to observe a holy Lent...for a purpose.

But it seems to me there is another layer of Lenten wisdom being presented to us this year in particular, and I think it has to do with grief.

Grief is the universal human condition that is uniquely experienced by each person individually as the internal journey following loss. It is a spiritual journey, a process that unfolds over time, and it is very real. Everyone grieves because everyone experiences loss, but like our fingerprints, we each carry our unique imprint of grief with us.

When people say it seems like Lent never ended, I believe they are giving voice to their grief given all the accumulated loss of the last year. 500,000 U.S. dead due to COVID, loss of school, loss of jobs, loss of financial security, loss of home, loss of our national naivete about racism, the resurgence of Christian nationalism, or the false floor of creedal commitments to liberty and justice for all. Loss of human touch, loss of human gatherings, loss of travel. The list could go on.

Maybe you didn't experience all of these, but we all experience some...a lot really, and even if you have come through relatively unscathed, the weight of the collective loss cannot but weigh on your heart as well.

And so we grieve. Each in our own way, but we all are grieving.

I've seen an uptick in the biting edge of discourse in recent weeks, even among people not usually inclined to such sharpness. Maybe you've noticed it, too. There's a smoldering anger that has moved beyond its usual stomping grounds on social media, and into our grocery stores, and phone conversations, and Zoom meetings. Even among family members. I see it as a manifestation of this cumulative grief—an understandable eruption to relieve that ache of grief perhaps not yet named...

Can we name it here? And is this naming of our grief part of the Lenten work we are called to undertake this year?

You will recall Dr. Elizabeth Kubler-Ross's famous five stages of grief—denial, anger, bargaining, depression, acceptance. While she intended these to be used to explicate the experience of those with terminal illness, they resonated so well with the universal human experience of grief, that they became in short order the *sine qua non* of understanding grief

across the spectrum of life's experiences. Kubler Ross insisted, however, that we not think of them as stages to pass through sequentially or in a prescribed fashion. Remember, we each grieve uniquely.

Near the end of her own life she and fellow researcher David Kessler worked to further develop this field of grief science, and Kessler has since written a book in which he identifies a sixth stage of grief, which he calls "finding meaning." While our society exerts enormous pressure to "get over grief," it doesn't work that way. There is no "closure" after loss, if by that we mean the grief goes away. But it can be transformed, over time, into a more peaceful or even hopeful frame.

Which brings me back to the question: what is the purpose of this Lenten journey? In today's gospel, I think Jesus was grieving what he intuitively knew was about to happen—the anticipatory grief of the suffering and pain and loss. Peter was in denial—his own way of grieving the prospect of losing Jesus who meant so much to him. I suspect Peter had a tinge of anger in his protest—understandable given what was at stake.

But then Jesus goes on to offer a brief teaching—this is the core of Lenten wisdom here. Losing one's life to save it...deeper than

preparation or giving up chocolate, although these may help hone one's spiritual readiness to receive Lenten wisdom...

This is deeper because it is paradoxical wisdom—that in the experience of loss, meaning can be found. Meaning is gained. That doesn't lessen the sting of loss. It doesn't make it okay. The loss is real; the grief is real. It still stinks, so let's be honest about that. But let's be aware of it also, and how we may be expressing our grief in light of all that we've lost in the last year.

Here's what I know: it is often in the experience of exile, when the familiar and routine are taken away, that the scales fall from our eyes to discover some new meaning in life that enables us to find our way home, or to make a new home that we cannot yet see, but somehow trust is there.

We don't rush to Easter and pretend the cross did not happen. But neither do we languish in Lent with no meaning to be gleaned. Jesus did not invite us into such a barren land. Which is why we speak of forty days of Lent. Forty days is the Church's way of saying an ample time—sufficient for the journey at hand. If you count the days from Ash Wednesday to Easter Sunday, you'll get 47 days, not 40.

That's because Sundays in Lent are not counted. They are celebrations of the resurrection still—thematically connected to the Lenten discourse, but with the indelible marks of resurrection hope to sustain us on the way. Which is to say God is with us on the journey, this Lenten journey, difficult as it may be, prolonged as it may feel, and nothing

can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus—nothing, not death, nor loss, nor anything in all creation.

Jesus was willing to die for that truth to live into this moment, and for us to find meaning through it, even as grief pierces our hearts.



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