

Coming Close to the Mystery of Easter – Georgann Kurtz-Shaw

Deuteronomy 26:1-11; Psalm 91:1-2, 9-16; Romans 10:8b-13; Luke 4:1-13

I want to start by giving you a little Godly Play lesson. If you don't know, Godly Play is what we do on Sunday mornings with the young children during Sunday School time. Do you know what this is? The children could tell you. It's how the church tells time; it's the circle of the church year. We begin near the top of the circle with Advent every year and proceed clockwise through Christmas, Epiphany, Lent, Easter, Pentecost, Ordinary Time—the green and growing weeks—and back to Advent again.

So where are we now? Since we just marked Ash Wednesday this past week, the clock shows us that we are on the first Sunday of Lent, the first of six purple Sundays leading up to Easter. There are three great times every year—Christmas, Easter, and Pentecost. In Godly Play we talk about how we can get so busy or distracted by other things that we sometimes “walk right through” the mystery of these times, without even knowing they're here. That's why the church takes time to help us get ready to “come close” to these mysteries. These purple Sundays for Advent and Lent help us get ready to “come close” to the mystery of Christmas and the mystery of Easter. Notice that we have six Sundays in Lent but only four in Advent leading up to Christmas. In Godly Play we say that's because “Easter is an even greater mystery than Christmas. It is so great that it keeps going on. You can't keep it in one Sunday. It overflows and goes on for six more Sundays”—making an entire Easter season.

Some people try to “come close” to the mystery of Easter by giving up things that get in the way during Lent. So what are people giving up for Lent this year? According to the “2016 Twitter Lent Tracker” (this is solid research), the top ten winners for 2016 are: chocolate; social networking; Twitter; alcohol; school; swearing; soda; sweets; coffee; fast food. Did yours make the top ten? You may have heard the news this week that at least one presidential candidate chose to give up something that ranks in this top ten list. Jeb Bush, who is described by CNN as a “devout Catholic,” campaigned on Wednesday with ashes on his forehead. When asked what he gave up for Lent, Bush said he gave up profanity “to set an example for other candidates in the race,” but then he later had to admit to reporters that, “Yes,” he did use a profanity on Thursday when he was campaigning in South Carolina. But in his defense, he also said he felt “a little Catholic guilt” when he realized what he had done.

The Lenten season is only four days old now. That means we have 36 more days of penitence in the wilderness, not counting Sundays, to dwell on our sinfulness and to torture ourselves into submission—36 more days without chocolate or soda or Twitter or Netflix or whatever you may have vowed to deny yourself this Lenten season.

On Wednesday as Lent began and we celebrated Ash Wednesday, we were reminded that we “are dust, and to dust we will return.” We had a beautiful Ash Wednesday service here at St. Paul's. The words of the Wednesday service here reminded us that we're on the pathway of penitence during these days of Lent. The words of the “Litany of Penitence” that we read responsively on Wednesday evening are challenging words to hear and to say. Listen to these words from that confession: *... we have sinned by ... what we have done, and by what we have left undone ... We have not loved our neighbors as ourselves. We have not forgiven others ... We confess ... Our self-indulgent appetites and ways ... our exploitation of other people ... our envy of those more fortunate than ourselves, Our intemperate love of worldly goods and comforts ... our dishonesty in daily life and work, Our negligence in prayer and*

worship ... our blindness to human need and suffering ... our indifference to injustice and cruelty ... [our] false judgments, [our] uncharitable thoughts, our prejudice and contempt toward those who differ from us ... our waste and pollution of your creation, and our lack of concern for those who come after us... This corporate “Litany of Penitence” seems to cover just about every sin we might have committed. It’s beautiful in its forthright statement of truth. We are depraved sinners in need of true repentance. And Lent reminds us of that. Like our Scriptures for today, Lent takes us to the wilderness.

Both our Old Testament and our Gospel lessons take place in the wilderness with only the Jordan River Valley and centuries separating them. Deuteronomy 26 takes us into the wilderness east of the Jordan River to join the Israelites at the climax of their exodus story. Moses is nearing the end of the sermon he has been preaching for much of the book of Deuteronomy, and nearing the end of his life, and the Israelites have neared the end of their 40 years of wilderness wanderings. They stand on the high plains of Moab looking down at the fertile Jordan River Valley that awaits them to the west, the *land flowing with milk and honey* that they and their ancestors have been trying to reach for the last 40 years.

In our Luke passage, following his baptism in the Jordan River, Jesus was *led by the Spirit* to the west, out of that *land flowing with milk and honey* that the Israelites are looking down on in Deuteronomy 26 and into wilderness on its other side, where he was *tempted by the devil* for forty days. Like many during Lent today, Jesus fasted during those forty days, but he gave up more than chocolate. Luke tells us that Jesus *ate nothing at all during those days* in the wilderness, and still he was able to resist all the devil’s temptations.

But if we look at our Scriptures carefully today, we’ll notice that this first Sunday of Lent does much more than take us to the wilderness and remind us of our weaknesses and depravity. These Scriptures don’t tell the story of a God who condemns, but they tell the story of a God of abundance—a God who rescues abundantly, a God who blesses abundantly, a God who protects abundantly, a God who loves abundantly, and a God whose abundant grace crosses all boundaries.

These Israelites have been rescued from bondage and from homelessness. In combination with their ancestors, they have been wandering for forty years, and in this chapter, they are finally looking down into the valley at the abundant *bounty* that God promised them—a *land flowing with milk and honey*. Today much of the best produce in Israel/Palestine still comes from this same fertile soil. As they look down, rather than focus on the trials that they have endured, Moses reminds the Israelites of God’s faithfulness to their people, and he gives them instructions for how they should treat the *bounty* that they are about to inherit as the children of God. After they sink their roots deeply down into this land and it yields for them a great harvest, they must acknowledge God’s deliverance as well as celebrate and share the *bounty* that God provides them.

Psalm 91 celebrates God as protector. It overflows with divine, extravagant, beautiful promises of God’s protection throughout all our wilderness wanderings. If we read Psalm 91 literally, we could walk out of church and into a lion’s cage with confidence that God would protect us. Jews and Christians have copied passages from this Psalm and worn it on their bodies in amulets to magically ward off danger. It has been used to argue that guardian angels protect us from harm.

The psalmist doesn't exaggerate in affirming that God is abundantly able to protect us in any place, any time, and any circumstance, but the story of Jesus' temptation in the wilderness presented in the Gospels rejects the use of Scripture in the literal way that some might interpret this psalm. Psalm 91 shows up in both Matthew's and Luke's accounts of Christ's temptation story. In our Gospel lesson from Luke today, in his third test the devil quotes Psalm 91 in order to tempt Jesus to jump off the top of the temple, but Jesus refuses to claim God's promise of protection for his own benefit. Jesus says that to do so would be to test rather than to trust God. Besides the obvious parallels to the story of the Israelites being tested in the wilderness for 40 years, it's important to note that each time Jesus responds to one of the devil's temptations, he quotes from the book of Deuteronomy. He draws upon the story he has inherited, that he knows well and loves, and he takes up his part in that same story just as Scripture foretold. So rather than use Psalm 91 as a magical guarantee to whip out so that he can "one up" the devil, Jesus demonstrates the power of God's abundant love through his own love and reverence for God his Father.

In our epistle lesson, Paul argues that God's offer of salvation is abundant; it is extended to all, both *Jew and Greek*. It crosses every boundary that we create. When the Israelites were about to *settle* the land God was giving them to *possess*, Moses instructed them to share the *bounty* of that land with the *Levites* as well as with the *aliens* who lived among them. They needed to remember their own history. They needed to remember that their ancestor Jacob was an alien in Egypt, and that they and their ancestors had spent the last 40 years as aliens. As aliens themselves, they should understand the needs of the aliens among them. Their wilderness story should lead them to inclusion rather than exclusion, yet both the ancient history of Israel and the history of Israel as a 20th- and 21st-century nation-state point to the difficulty of both taking possession of the land and being hospitable to the stranger and alien. Both the Romans and Deuteronomy passages affirm for us the abundance of God's gift of salvation to all who believe.

As I was thinking about how I might respond to Lent this year, I was reminded by Pope Francis of these words from early church father John Chrysostom: "No act of virtue can be great if it is not followed by advantage for others. So, no matter how much time you spend fasting, no matter how much you sleep on a hard floor and eat ashes and sigh continually, if you do no good to others, you do nothing great." Francis says that, "Each year during Lent we need to hear once more the voice of the prophets who cry out and trouble our conscience." So rather than thinking about what vice we want to struggle to live without for 40 days, or how we can exercise greater self-discipline, Francis would have us wrestle with what we can do to benefit others during Lent.

While he was still a Cardinal in Argentina, Francis identified what he calls the "globalization of indifference." In explaining it, he said that "whenever our interior life becomes caught up in its own interests and concerns, there is no longer room for others, no place for the poor. God's voice is no longer heard, the quiet joy of his love is no longer felt, and the desire to do good fades . . . We end up being incapable of feeling compassion at the outcry of the poor, weeping for other people's pain, and feeling a need to help them, as though all this were someone else's responsibility and not our own." Isn't Pope Francis right? It's so easy to focus all our energy on our own aches and pains, our own personal conflicts, and our own uncertainties about the future and not have any energy or time left for others. When we do take our eyes off ourselves for a while, in this frenetic 21st century world in which we are daily bombarded with injustice, it's so easy to become paralyzed by the incredible amount of

pain we see. It's so tempting to protect ourselves by allowing a numbness, a blindness, yes, an indifference to grow in our lives. It's easy to become trapped in a wilderness.

But our Scripture lessons for today remind us that God is in control. God rescues us, God blesses us, God protects us, God loves us. God goes beyond all that we are and can be. Even when we are paralyzed by indifference, God continues to work abundantly within us and through us in the world. Even when we can't see beyond the pains and uncertainties of our own lives, God continues to work abundantly within us and through us in the world. As we move through the next five weeks, I invite you to let Lent help you "get ready to come close to the mystery of Easter." I invite you to be silent and listen to the "voice of the prophets who cry out and trouble [your] conscience," as God nudges you away from indifference and into directions that will ultimately benefit others. May God give us eyes to see and ears to hear. Amen.

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