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Lent as a Journey in Discernment -- B. J. Parker

Genesis 2:15-17, 3:1-7; Psalm 32; Romans 5:12-19; Matthew 4:1-11

My wife, Courtney, and I moved to Greenville a little over seven months ago. Moving is always exciting and challenging for a whole host of reasons, and one of those is finding a faith community that you can feel at home in and fully give yourself to. To be honest, it didn't take us very long to find St. Paul's, and to quickly feel at home, and we're pretty grateful for that. Here, at the beginning of Lent, I've been thinking about this community. I've wondered about all the different circumstances and life experiences that have brought us together to be part of the Body of Christ in Greenville. I've been wondering about how and where we grew up. More specifically, I've been thinking about how we as individuals, and even as a community, have been shaped in our understanding of God and God's creative work around us. I think that that sort of reflection is good, especially at a time like Lent. I wonder as a community what past experiences we share.

I grew up in a conservative community that was deeply suspicious of anything that might even remotely resemble a Catholic tradition. It might not surprise you, then, that I thought Lent was something you picked off your clothes and secretly out of your belly button. Right along with that, my understanding of Easter went something like this: You've sinned. So you're really guilty. In fact, God's pretty hacked off at you. Lucky for you, there's a solution: Jesus' bloody torture and execution—that should have been your bloody execution. And then he came back to life, but no one really understood it. So as a young person, if I thought about it at all, I'd usually spend the time leading up to Easter thinking about how bad I was and trying to figure out a way to feel happy about Jesus' torture.

Our texts for today, though, offer us a different orientation to our Lenten journey—an orientation that's much more robust, much more beautiful, much more heartbreaking, and much more mysterious. The Genesis text reminds us, as Walter Brueggemann says, of our most foundational memory of our true life with God. God gives humanity the vocation of caring for creation and, in turn, humans are the recipient of creation's sustenance. Humanity, then, is joined with God in the ongoing work of creation. And the rest of the text plays out in a way we all know. The serpent comes to the garden and with just a few words draws humanity away from life with God. So one way think of this account is a discerning of voices. God's voice forms, breathes, plants, puts, makes, and gives. The serpent on the other hand, simply questions and contradicts: *Did God say?* and *You will not die*. What hangs in the balance of discerning between these two voices is life and death.

Our gospel for today parallels the Genesis account in an interesting way. Jesus goes into the wilderness and has to discern between two voices—again, the voices of life and death. In Matthew 4, the deceiver is much more vocal than in Genesis 3, but he acts in the same way—he encourages Jesus to reject God's care, sustenance, and intention for humanity to live life fully. In our second lesson for today, Romans 5, Paul reminds us of the two warring powers that hold humanity in tension: sin and grace. For Paul, the power of sin enters into and permeates all of humanity by the actions of the first humans. In contrast to this, the greater power, grace,

welcomes, sustains, liberates, directs and redeems us through the most human of all humans—Jesus. And finally, the Psalmist helps us celebrate full and whole life with God when the Psalmist writes, Blessed is the person *whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered and Be glad in Yahweh and rejoice, O righteous.*

On Ash Wednesday we started our Lenten journey. We joined Jesus in the wilderness for a time of discerning of voices. In the wilderness we reflect on the voices of life and death. We reflect on the source of life, what life looks like, feels like, tastes like ... as well as the opposite of these things. Lent calls us to reflect on the absence of life and the implications of this absence. And we also reflect on our role in that ongoing drama.

I wonder what that sort of reflection and discernment looks like for us, for this group, for this church family. What would it look like for us to spend this season of Lent slowing down, listening, and considering the true life that echoes throughout our texts? What would it look for us to also consider that true life's disintegration and eventual re-creation through Easter? I think that the place to begin that process is to consider first what true life is. In his book, *Not the Way It's Supposed to Be: A Breviary of Sin*, Cornelius Plantinga, Jr., devotes a good chunk of his first chapter to sketching out what true life looks like. As an Old Testament scholar, I especially like his approach because he starts with the notion of Shalom. Here's how Plantinga defines the Hebrew word and idea of Shalom: "In the Bible, shalom means universal flourishing, wholeness, and delight—a rich state of affairs in which natural needs are satisfied and natural gifts fruitfully employed. It is a state of affairs that inspires joyful wonder as its Creator and savior opens doors and welcomes the creatures in whom the Creator delights." If we want to flesh out this idea of shalom a bit more, I tend to think that our deepest longings are a good place to start. And just like we are a diverse community, our longings for true life are diverse. And we need them all to make up the whole picture of shalom. For some of us, we walk outside in the woods during the fall and hear the crunch of the leaves on the ground, see the bright cerulean blue sky and the emblazoned colors of yellow and red in the trees and smell the hint of cold weather in the air and know that these things are somehow, unexplainably, good. The earth, the mysteries of creation—they matter, and are good gifts from God that we as humans have been deeply entrusted with to care for and to celebrate. This transcendence is shalom.

Others feel the deep fire of justice in their bones. They're aware of the power of large groups and institutions as well as the physical needs of their friends, their family, and other community members. Protecting the powerless and seeing true equality and justice prevail invigorates these people and they know that God's face is seen in the poor. This justice is shalom. For others of us here, we ache to be filled, for wholeness, and for meaning. We long to be known by God and become more of our true self and we see and feel the importance of others' being accepted and known in the same way. This knowing is shalom.

For others of us still, we feel a deep humility because of God's great and forgiving love. We long to be faithful and to evaluate and choose between right and wrong because of God's forgiving love. We see brokenness all around us and deeply desire to share God's redeeming love. This sense of rightness with God is shalom.

And finally, some of us, I imagine, long for the strength to persevere—to endure with integrity. We desire to be strengthened by the companion God who suffers alongside us and to bear up, steady under the weight of life with our head held high. This steadiness and integrity is shalom. I think that taken together all of these longings—and more, I’m sure—begin to help us remember what our true life is, as well who this God is who calls us to true life. And in Lent we find an invitation to ruminate on our true life and the voice that call us to true life.

We also are called into the wilderness, though, to consider death and the voice that calls us into the abyss. We know this voice well. This is the voice that leads us into systemic corruption, complacent disregard for the oppressed, unrestrained practices that lead to environmental degradation. This is the voice that fans the flame of lust for all that we do not possess, that assuages us that spiritual discipline is a stark remnant of a dusty conservatism, that encourages and rewards us when we cultivate disdain for those with whom we disagree in matters of politics, theology, and other such abstract arenas. This is the voice that celebrates the accumulation of raw, unadulterated power and the use of that power for no one except myself. This is the voice that seeks to lead us into the vandalism and corruption of shalom. And this is also the voice that assuages all of us here this morning that these lines that I’ve just said seem distant, different, and probably don’t characterize us.

I don’t think that voice of death speaks to us in fierce words, encouraging us to perpetrate genocide, or to abuse people in our family. My guess is that the voice of the deceiver speaks to us in a way that is much softer and more dangerous. It probably speaks in a way that we barely recognize it at all, but it still encourages and lulls us into a stupor that violently disassembles shalom. Is it busyness? I have to ignore this guy asking for help—aren’t I late for my appointment anyways? And I really do need to make this presentation. I’ll help next time. Or is it inactivity? There are enough people are speaking out against racial discrimination, gender inequality, all the social evils that I can’t even think of. Besides, if repression of a group really needs to be changed, won’t it just happen regardless of what I do? Or does the voice lull us into the vice of unrestrained ambition? I have to work another long day. I know my spouse and child told me that they miss me, but the next publication is almost done. And I can go to the next ball game. They will think it’s worth it when we’re on vacation. I can’t stop now, I’m so close!

Or does the voice of death gently inoculate us into convenience? Habits of sustainable consumption—those are just too expensive. And I can’t find stores in Greenville or Edwardsville that sell ethical clothing and happy meat! I’m too young to worry about how I eat or shop impacts the world around me. Besides, my parents make all of those decisions. Or does the voice persuade us that our materialism is just reasonable and a way of life? Isn’t it reasonable to have a closet full of clothes for the season? And you know, I have to look professional. Who doesn’t have a nice house with new things? Besides, we give to the church and there are plenty of organizations that provide for others.

I want to be clear here; I’m not saying that any of these actions are necessarily wrong. Sometimes we do need to work late or stay home or buy something, or remain silent or speak out. I wonder if when we think of recognizing the voice of death, though, if we expect something as blatant as, *Fall down and worship me*. If we look at the times the serpent speaks in Genesis 3

and the devil speaks in Matthew 4, the language that appears is much less provocative and much more reasonable. *Did God really say? You surely won't die. Didn't God say...? Aren't you the Son of God?*

In truth, I'm not sure that discerning between the life-giving voice of God and the voice that is the harbinger of death is easy. I think maybe, though, that's one of the reasons that we've been gifted the grace of Lent.

Friends, Lent offers us a season to just stop for a minute. Lent invites into a time of listening and reflecting. This journey calls us to be quiet, to be vulnerable, to be introspective and to confess. It calls us to slowly and purposefully remember our true life with God and then to cling to that life tenaciously. Those deep longings that we feel and sense to somehow be good on a deep level and even connected to God, these can help us find the voice of God and life. Lent is an invitation to us all to listen to those true longings and consider how our lives are or are not shaped around them. St. Paul's, may we be a people who finds life in the wilderness of Lent.