

First Sunday in Lent – Bob Munshaw

Genesis 9:8-17; Psalm 25:1-10; I Peter 3:18-22; Mark 1:9-15

On Wednesday evening, many of us gathered here in the sanctuary, confessed our sins, and received the ashes with the solemn reminder spoken so solemnly by Dr Hartley ... You are from dust, and to dust you shall return.” And with this message, and with sober hearts, we have entered into the season of Lent. At St. Paul’s, we have chosen to live liturgically by entering into the Church year. Our Catholic friends^[1] describe “this approach to life and living is not simply the acting out of the great events of salvation, the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Rather, it is an invitation to all the baptized, living their lives now in the Church which is the Body of Christ and thus to enter into the deeper meaning of our faith; to experience our Salvation as an ongoing process as we cooperate with grace and allow the Holy Spirit, the same Spirit which raised Jesus from the dead, to change us from within making us more like Him.”

This morning’s Scripture passages are flooded with a deluge of references to water. The Genesis account begins with the aftermath of the flood. Noah and his family were fresh out of the ark ... breathing in fresh air for the perhaps the first time since being closed up in the ark. They are on the side of Mt. Ararat, and while the water is beginning to diminish, they are still living in some strange waterworld. As the sun beats down, you can imagine the mist rising from the waters, and in the distance a brilliant double rainbow is providing Noah and his family a picturesque Kodak moment in what God describes as a sign of the covenant ... as a sign of His grace...

In I Peter 3, Peter reflects on the flood as a precursor to baptism. Just as God saved Noah and his family through the waters of the flood, so too is baptism a salvific act in which a person dies to themselves as they go under the water and is resurrected to a new life in Christ as they are raised up from the water. Peter reminds us that this is not a washing of dirt from the body, but a direct appeal to God’s grace, the same grace that God extended through the promise of the rainbow.

The gospel reading begins with the baptism of Jesus. For those of you who are interested, you could argue that there is a reference to the Trinity at Jesus baptism as the spirit descends like a dove and as the Father speaks from heaven. But we’ll leave that alone for Trinity Sunday and stay focused on the meat of the story.

We read that after his baptism, the spirit drove Jesus out into the wilderness. Alright, for those of you in the college Sunday School class. Do you remember anything that we have learned about the wilderness?

It is a place of refuge. Think about the Old Testament stories of wilderness. What do we remember from them?

The forty days of lent mirror the forty days of Jesus in the wilderness. And it was after this time that Jesus began his ministry and Mark describes Jesus' preaching ministry as focusing on two things. He told the people to repent ... which literally means to turn away, or to do a 180 from the wrong ways that they had focused their lives around and he proclaimed the good news about the kingdom of God ... and I would like to suggest that this dual message of Jesus is also a message of grace.

The first part of his message that I'd like us to consider is the word of repentance, and I'd like to begin by having us think about the season of Lent that began this past Wednesday. Lent itself is the season of self-examination, fasting and penance leading up to and preparing the Christian for our Easter Day observance. Many people will either sacrifice something or things that they enjoy, such as chocolate or coffee, or even electronics during this time, the idea being that as we miss the object that we have forsaken, each of us is reminded of the grace and the love of Jesus, who never forsakes us.

The 25th Psalm encourages us in an attitude of humble repentance. We read that this is a Psalm of David. There's no need for us to rehearse all of the sins of David. He was called a man after God's own heart, but he also had a shady enough track record in his time as a king that in America we would have locked him up and thrown away the key. Maybe we aren't guilty of the same sins as David, but let's be honest ... if there is anywhere we can be encouraged to be honest, it is in the company of the forgiven, isn't it? So, let's be honest ... our track record isn't exactly spotless either, is it.

In David's prayer, he is asking God for grace; grace he knows he doesn't deserve. He is honest enough to admit that he has sins that ... and David has also come to a point where he recognizes that the best way he can live his life is in God's grace, following God's way. He claims, "All the paths of the Lord are steadfast love and faithfulness." But even knowing that, he knows that he still needs help. – knowing what is right and best for us, and doing what is right and best for us are not the same thing. (I know that this donut is not right and best for me, especially as I am supposed to be losing another 20 lbs or so ... but that miserable donut sings me siren songs with it's splendid smells. This is what sin does to us. James says that we are tempted when we are dragged away by our own evil desires and enticed. A more mature David has grown to recognize his weaknesses, and his need for help. He prays for God's mercy. He prays for forgiveness, and He prays that God will teach him his paths and lead him in truth.

One of the benefits of morning or evening prayers, a benefit that I have rarely taken advantage of, is that we are encouraged to keep our slates clean and our hearts soft before God.

So there is a message of repentance which is so that we can experience God's grace and God's plan, and there is the Good News .. the Gospel

Sometimes the best way to understand something is through story. This is a great story, but like many internet stories, there is always the question of veracity. In this case, I did a little research through Snopes.com a site that traces urban legends. They did a lot of archival searching, and finally traced the story back to the 1930's, though ultimately they could not decide if it was true or just a really nice urban legend. True or not, the story reeks of the Good News. Perhaps you've heard it.

Anyways, the story is told about Fiorello LaGuardia, who, when he was mayor of New York City during the worst days of the Great Depression and all of WWII, was called by adoring New Yorkers 'the Little Flower' because he was only five foot four and always wore a carnation in his lapel. He was a colorful character who used to ride the New York City fire trucks, raid speakeasies with the police department, take entire orphanages to baseball games, and whenever the New York newspapers were on strike, he would go on the radio and read the Sunday funnies to the kids. One bitterly cold night in January of 1935, the mayor turned up at a night court that served the poorest ward of the city. LaGuardia dismissed the judge for the evening and took over the bench himself.

Within a few minutes, a tattered old woman was brought before him, charged with stealing a loaf of bread. She told LaGuardia that her daughter's husband had deserted her, her daughter was sick, and her two grandchildren were starving. But the shopkeeper, from whom the bread was stolen, refused to drop the charges. "It's a real bad neighborhood, your Honor." the man told the mayor. "She's got to be punished to teach other people around here a lesson." LaGuardia sighed. He turned to the woman and said "I've got to punish you. The law makes no exceptions—ten dollars or ten days in jail." But even as he pronounced sentence, the mayor was already reaching into his pocket. He extracted a bill and tossed it into his famous sombrero saying: "Here is the ten dollar fine which I now remit; and furthermore I am going to fine everyone in this courtroom fifty cents for living in a town where a person has to steal bread so that her grandchildren can eat. Mr. Baliff, collect the fines and give them to the defendant." So the following day the New York City newspapers reported that \$47.50 was turned over to a bewildered old lady who had stolen a loaf of bread to feed her starving grandchildren, fifty cents of that amount being contributed by the red-faced grocery store owner, while some seventy petty criminals, people with traffic violations, and New York City policemen, each of whom had just paid fifty cents for the privilege of doing so, gave the mayor a standing ovation.

Way, way back in the day when I was a college student, I managed to get hooked up with a great paying summer job. I spent my nights working at the meat packing plant. Night after night, I worked the lines, learning all of the finer points of making hotdogs. Some nights I was in the grinding room ... loading in each and every "ingredient" that you could imagine which was ground into a fascinating pinkish coloured paste. Sometimes, I worked in the mixing room where we guarded the secret ingredients and mixed spices into the pink paste. Other times I worked in the magical place where the pink paste went into the tubular casings before they were

taken to the gigantic ovens to be cooked. But most often, I spent the long summer nights packing up the final product before it was taken to market.

And each morning, when I returned home to my grandparents home, their little poodle would be waiting expectantly, tail wagging, to welcome me home. At some point early on, I realized that the dog had no real interest in me, it was the smell of smoked meat that saturated my being every night that called to that dog. For, anyone could smell me coming from quite a distance.

It's interesting the way that smells can speak to our hearts in different ways. The smell of fresh pine might bring back memories of a special Christmas moment. The aroma of freshly baked bread, or cookies can transport us back 30 years to grandma's kitchen.

And then there is the smell of rain ... In Saskatchewan there is something about the smell of rain. – In late July and early August, as the crops of wheat and barley are drying out in the field, parched for water, with the earth baked hard under the blistering sun, and the farmers feverishly praying, the smell of rain is the scent of hope restored. In Spring, it is a smell of the promise of hope, as the water nourishes new life after the long cold dead of winter. The smell of rain is the promise of new life ... the promise of hope ... the promise of grace

“Grace,” writes Frederick Buechner, “is something you can never get but can only be given. There's no way to earn it or deserve it or bring it about any more than you can deserve the taste of raspberries and cream or earn good looks or bring about your own birth. A good sleep is grace and so are good dreams. Most tears are grace. The smell of rain is grace. Somebody loving you is grace. Have you ever tried to love somebody?”

We live in a world of judgement, but the Gospel is the story of grace ... the Gospel is the story of undeserved and transforming power of God's love. Those who have truly been transformed by God's grace can't help but begin to share it with others. Over time, they radiate it ... it exudes from their pores. They reek of it. These are people who are willing to see the best in others, because God was willing to see the best in them.

Conclusion

We are a community of broken people ... we are spread too thin ... we often make bad, or selfish choices

... but we are also becoming – we are the ransomed of God. I mentioned earlier that we live liturgically by entering into the Church year; that observing the church year is the I want to invite you and encourage you in this season of lent to repent of those things in your life that you need to repent of ... and I also want to invite you to open your hearts to the Good News of the Grace of God and to the ways that he wants to work in your lives.

[1] www.catholicresourcecenter.org/site/descargar.php?f=resources/...

