

*Show Us Your Ways – a Lenten Journey*  
Lent 1B, Mark 1:9-15  
Grace Church Newton  
February 18, 2024

THIS IS A DRAFT TEXT OF THE SERMON. IT MAY VARY FROM THE PRESENTED VERSION. PLEASE EXCUSE TYPOS AND GRAMMATICAL ERRORS, AND DO NOT CITE WITHOUT PERMISSION.

*Show me your ways, O Lord, and teach me your paths. Amen. (Psalm 25:3)*

Today is the first Sunday of Lent, this annual season of preparation, of reflection and penance. With a little loose counting, the season of Lent is 40 days. There are actually 46 days between Ash Wednesday (when Lent begins )and Easter, but we don't count Sundays. So, this season of preparation is 40 days, culminating with our celebration of the resurrection.

Did you notice that...our readings this morning on this first Sunday of Lent are abundantly sprinkled with references to this number: forty.

Another thing about the season of Lent. Through the centuries, this season has traditionally been the time in which people were prepared to become full members of the Christian community culminating with their baptism as the sun rose on Easter morning.

Did you notice that...our readings this morning on this first Sunday of Lent are centered around images of *water*?

This Lenten season springs from the patterns of life that shape and are shaped by Hebrew and Christian scripture. A verse from today's psalm captures the essence of our Lenten journey. This is a time for us to pray, "*Show [us] your ways, O Lord, and teach [us] your paths.*"

So what do these two images – 40 days? Passing through water? -- what do they symbolize?

- *40 days* (or 40 years) – this number 40 in Hebrew and Christian scripture symbolizes the time of preparation, of trial and hardship AND the new life that comes in its wake. Periods of 40 might be seen as the gestation of a new era.
- *Water is* life. It symbolizes the creative, life-giving power of God. It is a marker of newness. Passing through water into new life.

We could probably all name famous examples of water and the number 40 in the stories of the bible, and they often come paired together:

- These images are with us from the very beginning of scripture. In fact, the first verse of the first chapter of the first book of the Bible, Genesis 1:1: “When God began to create the heavens and the earth, the earth was complete chaos, and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters” (NRSV). From water, new life.
- Noah and his family were safeguarded through the waters in the ark. The rains raged for 40 days. As God re-created the world.
- The Israelites, led by Moses, passed through the waters of the Red Sea to a new life of freedom.
- Yet a season of hardship still awaited. After fleeing Egypt, the Israelites wandered in the wilderness. They struggled to find food and water. They chased after false gods. And after 40 years of wandering, of hardship, of trial, they passed through the waters of the River Jordan to new life in the land that God had promised them.
- And now, finally, in today’s readings Jesus is introduced by the gospel of Mark as embedded in – as a *continuation of* this ancient story. Mark shows Jesus passing through the waters of baptism. And then Jesus, too, was cast out into the wilderness for 40 days. And when he returned from this time of trial and hardship, he was prepared. The first thing he did, according to Mark, was share the message that would define his ministry: “Repent. Turn to God. A new era is coming!”

And so, as we enter our own 40 days, we pray: “*Show [us] your ways, O Lord, and teach [us] your paths.*”

Ultimately, the season of Lent is a time in which we learn to follow the ways of God, the paths of justice and righteousness and peace. In this way we seek and open ourselves to wholeness.

Our tradition points us to ways large and small, individual and communal, that can help us on that path. On Ash Wednesday, for example, the gospel pointed us to prayer and fasting and almsgiving in a quiet, private way. These are some of the practices that we might look to during Lent. Or some like to think of Lent as a time *to give something up* – that is, to fast – or as a time *to take something on* that might help us experience more God’s presence in our lives and in our world.

Perhaps yet another way of thinking about this season of Lent would be to focus on *noticing*. Individually, perhaps a daily practice of some sort might help you notice God in these days. Or our time together in worship might be a time to notice in a fresh way. I, for

example, have experienced moments of God's wholeness among us in recent weeks – from gathering around the font to baptize a child into the fellowship of God to sharing this altar with the Rev. Dr. Mark Gibson as we celebrated the life of his aunt, Dr. Bessie Lyman. Our prayers took on new life for me as I prayed them through the lens of her life and her life's work – sustaining her family, guiding this parish, leading in the educational community, always fighting the good fight. The people Bessie's life brought together here that day...that, for me, was a time of sacred wholeness.

I'm going to linger here for a moment, because Bessie's life points us to another potential Lenten practice, a penitential practice for many of us. An invitation to open our hearts to the continuing call for racial reconciliation in this country. Perhaps especially at this time, as our season of Lent coincides with Black History Month – your practice may be to invite the Spirit of God to illuminate for us the ways in which we are called – individually and as a community – to open ourselves to God's dream of wholeness for all people. To pray for humility. To pray to see our world through the justice-loving eyes of God.

*"Show [us] your ways, O Lord, and teach [us] your paths."*

Lent, this annual time of preparation, gives us an opportunity. Following in the footsteps of Noah and Moses and Joshua and Jesus, we are invited into this ancient rhythm of our faith – this 40-day journey toward the promise of new life, of growing toward wholeness. Lent can be for us a time of transformation, of opening hearts and noticing where God may be leading us at this moment in our lives – as individuals and as community. May this be a time when we are led on our way to becoming more and more whole.

*"Show [us] your ways, O Lord, and teach [us] your paths."* Blessings on your journey.

Amen.