

*Shifting the Lens*

Lent 5B, John 12:20-33

Grace Church Newton

March 17, 2024

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*Grant your people...that, among the swift and varied changes of the world, our hearts may surely be fixed where true joys are to be found. Amen. (Collect for Fifth Sunday in Lent, BCP 219)*

Here we are. As it says on the cover of your worship leaflet, today is the Fifth Sunday of Lent, this season of the church year – these forty days – when we endeavor to simplify our lives and open up space to connect more deeply with our Creator. We have completed four weeks of this holy season, and now we are entering this last week of Lent before we move into the most – shall we say – *concentrated* days of our church year – these days of Holy Week and Easter, beginning next Sunday with Palm Sunday.

So, here we are. Approaching this most holy of times. How's it going? How is your Lent?

Did you choose to take on some form of practice this season in hopes of growing more intentionally, of preparing more consciously to celebrate the deepest mystery of our faith that is Easter morning? If you did, by now, you *may* be feeling a deeper sense of connection. Or *maybe* you took on an intentional practice this Lent, but this just doesn't seem to be the year; it may not feel as meaningful; or your experience somehow isn't what you had expected or hoped or thought you needed.

As we all know, there is no *one* path through Lent. There is no *one* way to open ourselves up to the presence of God in our lives, to walk imaginatively and spiritually with Jesus through this time, reminding ourselves of the lengths he was willing to go for love of humanity. There is no *one* way to contemplate what he willingly, knowingly risked in service to God's vision of love, and kindness, and forgiveness, and justice that is possible in this world through the grace of God. There is no *one* way.

So...how is *your* walk along this Lenten path going? As we move into these last days, now may be a good time to pause and take stock.

I'll walk us back through some of the messages we've heard this season:

- On the first Sunday of Lent, we thought about how the images from the gospel that morning – water and the number 40 – how these images are symbolic of traveling through hardship into a new thing. This was our invitation into a holy Lent [[Source](#)].
- Then Rev. Elise spent some time with the Ten Commandments, wondering if we might see them in a new way. “The commandments,” she reminded us, “are not only *restrictions* on our freedom, but lead us to *deeper* freedom. Each ‘thou shalt not’” she said, “is a doorway into a way of sanctifying our daily lives and relationships; each prohibition is meant to open up a multitude of possibilities for new life... And it is only by accepting these apparent restrictions that we find true freedom,” she concluded [[Source](#)].
- Last week we looked at the thin line of grace between being terrified and being fascinated; between being annoyed and being curious [[Source](#)].
- And now this week, we add a new layer for our consideration. I am drawn to the collect this morning: “...bring into order [our] unruly wills,” we prayed, so that we might not be batted about by the “swift and varied changes of the world,” but instead learn what it is to have our hearts focused on true joy [[Source](#)].

There seems to be a common thread through our worship messages this Lent. The image that comes to mind – it’s not a very *poetic* image, but it works for me – it’s sort of like somehow – almost inexplicably, almost mystically – experiencing a shift in the lens through which we are seeing.

You know when you’re having your eyesight tested? They put you in front of this machine and ask you to look at the chart on the wall. For many of us, it starts out blurry. But then they flip the lens, and just like that the image becomes a bit clearer, crisper. And it usually takes more than one flip...Sometimes you actually flip back and forth to figure out which is the clearest view. But gradually, the shift of the lens enables us to see more clearly.

[I should say, there comes a time for many of us when no number of lens combinations will result in crisp *physical* vision, but maybe the metaphor can still hold *spiritually*.]

So, when we think about the symbols of Lent:

- Starting with water and time frames of 40, we can see *hardship*, or maybe we can work toward understanding the *new thing* God is bringing into being.
- We can see the law as a dry set of *obligations*, or we can learn to see a *doorway* to greater freedom.

- We can be *terrified* at events around us, or we can – continue to be concerned, perhaps, but also *curious* to see to see the new thing God is calling us into.
- We can *resist* what we might think of as God’s stifling our ‘unruly’ will, as today’s collect says, or we can see an *invitation to a stability*, a ballast that keeps us steady and joyful even as the world spins around us.

I wonder what lenses you brought with you into Lent. I wonder if in this Lent season you have noticed a shift in the lenses through which you see God’s movement in the world. I wonder if in these remaining days of Lent, especially as we enter this deepest part of the season – as we imaginatively walk with Jesus through Holy Week; as we *literally* live into the drama of his last days – I wonder whether you might notice an opening, a further shift in your spirit.

In these last days of Lent, may we find our souls settled. May we create that little bit more space in our lives to notice the sometimes *subtle* shifts this season invites for us. May we open our hearts to the continuous unfolding of our understanding. As we follow along with Jesus, may we catch an ever-emerging glimpse of that which he pointed to with all that he was – God’s vision of reconciliation and justice and peace.

Amen.