

*1 Lent Year A*

*Lections: Gen. 2:15-17,3:1-7; Ps. 32; Rom. 5:12-19; Matt. 4:1-11*

*May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O God, our Rock and our Redeemer.*

Good morning Grace Church! Despite the heavy-handed tone of our service so far this morning, it is truly a joy to break open the Word with you once again. Or more accurately, it is *because* of what we have heard and read and chanted this morning, that it is a joy to preach with you on this first Sunday in our Lenten pilgrimage.

Now, don't get me wrong, it's taken me many, many years of prayer and spiritual practices, of theological study, and of long conversations with people wiser than me to get to this point, where I do consider it good and right and joyful to meditate on the themes we've encountered this morning. But if you took a younger Isaac, say at 13 or 20 or even at 24 when I first encountered the Episcopal Church, and plopped him in the pew right now, having listened to the Great Litany and all its beseeching, or our readings about sin and resisting temptation, well, I might have walked right back out those big wooden doors.

I picked those ages—13, 20, 24—because those were the times in my life when I most needed to hear about the fullness of God's love and mercy, about Jesus coming to bring abundant life, and about the Holy Spirit's never-failing presence. At 13, I was deep in the throes of wrestling with being gay. I was wracked with shame at this "sin" I couldn't overcome, no matter how much I prayed and fasted. And I was struck with fear at an eternity spent in "hell" if I didn't change. And so, if 13-year-old me had heard a petition in the Great Litany like asking the good Lord to deliver us "from all inordinate and sinful affections; and from all the deceits of the world, the flesh, and the devil," well I tried that, and it didn't work.

At the age of 20 I was in a deep depression my junior year of college. I had come to Harvard College from my small, impoverished town in New Mexico. And while for the first two years I had been so proud, maybe too proud, of myself for making it to Harvard of all places, by that point I was sure the Admissions office had made a terrible mistake. I was at the point where I felt I should have had some mastery in the political science I was majoring in, but I just felt like an imposter, ending one class with a D+ and taking a leave of absence the next spring. I imagine if my 20-year-old self had sat through these readings from Genesis and Romans. I think I would have tried to tease out which of my actions, which of my sins, had led to the consequences of feeling unworthy of being at such a prestigious university, of fearing that I was wasting the best opportunity ever, and of looking at my life to come with anxiety instead of hope, probably sinking me deeper into depression.

And at 24, after a brief rebound with some much needed time away from Harvard, I failed to get into the U.S. Foreign Service, which I thought was my life's dream and calling, for the third time. I was stuck in a job that was just a job. I felt increasingly misunderstood by my friends and I lacked the knowledge and tools to give voice to the deep longing within me for my life to have some purpose, some meaning.

And in that moment, if I were to have heard about Jesus's temptation in the desert, I might have been desperate enough to stand up and shout at the priest reading the Gospel: "So what?! What does any of that have to do with my life and its troubles right now?"

So what, Grace Church? So what?

Well, to answer that question, I would like to zoom out for a moment as we consider why the lectionary has presented us with these readings on this first Sunday in Lent. As the Invitation in our Ash Wednesday service puts it:

The first Christians observed with great devotion the days of our Lord's passion and resurrection, and it became the custom of the Church to prepare for them by season of penitence and fasting. This season of Lent provided a time in which converts to the faith were prepared for Holy Baptism...Thereby, the whole congregation was put in mind of the message of pardon and absolution set forth in the Gospel of our Savior, and of the need which all Christians continually have to renew their repentance and faith.

"The need which all Christians continually have to renew their faith." That, my friends, is the "so what," not just of Lent, not just of today's readings and our Litany, but of everything we do in our spiritual lives, in every place, every day. Renew our faith.

As some of you may know, the concept of faith or belief in the time of Jesus and St. Paul was closer to what we now think of as trust. Jesus didn't ask his disciples and Paul doesn't ask the churches he writes to to believe *abstractly*, but rather to trust *personally*, to trust what they have to say about God and how God works because of the hearers' relationship to the speaker.

But then the question is, how do you build trust? Well, I've learned as a community organizer and as a priest, that we build trust by being mutually vulnerable with each other, by being willing to risk a part of yourself, your history, or your personality that you might otherwise not show another person.

Over the next five Sundays, we will hear stories of Jesus as he reveals more and more of who he truly is, culminating with his final week in Jerusalem. His increasing vulnerability and self-revelation invite us to risk being vulnerable ourselves.

And that is what Lent is about. Our tradition uses old words for it: penitence and fasting, but Lent is simply an invitation to strip away the defenses we have built up against a cruel and disappointing world. It is a time to risk going into the wildernesses in our own lives and letting them scrape away the distractions and distortions we use to give us only fleeting satisfaction. Lent is a time to learn once again how to be vulnerable with God, so that we can trust Them more and more, renew our faith more and more.

And with that built-up trust and renewed faith, we can take St. Paul at his word: Jesus's act of righteousness, of self-sacrifice, leads to justification, to salvation, to liberation, and life, for

all. That is what I would like to tell my 13, 20, and 24-year-old self. This suffering you are experiencing is not part of God's plan. God does not desire to be separated from you in any way. But those moments of suffering also carry redemption because they stripped and scraped away my self-deceit, pride, and shame: the unique ways I kept myself from knowing the fullness of God's love for me.

Looking back, I see how each of those moments allowed me to be vulnerable with God, to accept God's vulnerability to me, and thus to trust Her, to renew my faith in Her. And it is because of faith—that trust—that I know, I know, God's love and mercy never fail, that Jesus liberates me from all sin in order to live abundantly, and that the Holy Spirit is always, always with me. And beloved, that is my prayer for all of you, this Lent and always. Amen.