

Sermon for 6 March 2022 @ Bethesda UMC/Baltimore
First Sunday in Lent

Scriptures: Deuteronomy 26:1-11; Psalm 91:1-2, 9-16; Romans 10:8b-13;
Luke 4 :1-13

« *A more opportune time* »

How many of you have made a spiritual life retreat?

As a pastor, I've made many. I'm not sure how many preachers have ... There's lots of variety among us ... but I just felt it was part of the course for me, and over the years the practice has been a blessing. I've been to Roman Catholic retreat centers, to an ecumenical center called Kirkridge in northeastern Pennsylvania, and to many as part of larger conferences focused on music and worship arts, all over the country.

What we're doing today is to start the church's shorthand version of a retreat, known as Lent. In the Ash Wednesday service an introduction to Lent reminds us that the forty days leading up to Easter has, since the early days of Christianity, been a time when members renewed their membership vows, undertook personal disciplines, welcomed new converts ... Let me read the Ash Wednesday description.

The church generally, in my experience, doesn't take Lent very seriously ... certainly not in the Protestant branches. Growing up in Texas Methodism, Lent was something for Catholics and Episcopalians. We've been better since Vatican II ... but a little pep talk seems in order this year.

It seems, with all the troubles and uncertainties of 2022, we should take advantage of Lenten resources more than we're used to doing. Look at today's scriptures. The Old Testament lesson reminds us that the Jews ... our closest religious ancestors, as Christians ... took seriously the custom of giving back to the Almighty a portion of their material goods, every year. They thought of themselves as having a role in the life of humankind, demonstrating how to behave...that history, which they believed was totally controlled by the one god, Jahweh, was being pulled together, corrected, rebuilt, by their interaction with Jahweh ... and that, as we teach our kids, you're supposed to share, so here, a tenth of my produce, take it back and spread it around to help the world improve, preacher.

That's the first point of Lent: Act right before heaven. Interact with the universe generously. Accept the goodness of it all, and watch what happens.

The group song, or hymn, which we call the psalm, repeats and expands this. “Yea, we’re lucky; we’ll be safe if we act on this assumption.” Even, “God, this is the way you’re supposed to act. Do so.”

Then the Christian evidence of this is spelled out in the passage from the traveling preacher, Paul’s, letter. He elaborates and expands on our specific experience: “Nobody will be put to shame who believes and lives according to this,” Paul says. He specifies something that’s especially pointed at us and our historical moment: “There’s no separation between any group and the rest of us: ‘anyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.’”

Then, rounding the corner, our Gospel writer for this year, Luke, takes us through a striking personal experience of our special grasp of God. Luke spells out what we face as baptized humans. Luke gives it to us as Jesus’ story ... God alone knows how that got to be our understanding ... Did Jesus tell the disciples this private reality? How ever it originated, it beautifully grasps the point of unselfishness and courage we pray for as followers of Jesus.

All of this is the essence, the spiritual description, of what the church is offering us with Lent. Prodding us to take time, to engage in self-discipline, to accept the gift of faith on a literal, daily basis all year round ... and to start now.

I have a friend who is deeply experienced in Native American spirituality. Ben has met her. She just returned from a transformative time with others in this tradition. On the plane ride home, she met a doctor who shared some of his wisdom on how science is turning more towards the insights and practices of spiritual tradition. I’ll give you just a couple of examples.....

My point in this ... my aim in this whole reflection on the first Sunday in Lent this year of our Lord 2022 ... is to nudge you, and support us all, in taking time, to expand our outlook, to practice our self-disciplines, to tell each other insights, both here on Sunday and the whole rest of the weeks throughout Lent...to come to more humane treatment of ourselves and others than we’ve ever done before. This is holy ground we’re on. This is honorable service ... It suits all the appeals, all the horrors and blessings, that are around us right now. We have much to give. We have friends we can trust. There is new life we can discover and grow into. There are people And animals ... and organizations ... and natural chaos and brokenness that can be healed as we cooperate with all the elements of God that make up our world and our own natures.

I've left out the title thought. Think of how darkness ... evil ... danger ... the Devil ... comes into our personal experience. Turn it around: Think of all the opportunities the opposite of what we're afraid of shows up. There's much to handle better than we usually do, and there's much we already know how to give thanks for. Either way, that idea of fresh chances is useful to us. The way Luke tells it, there would be more ahead for Jesus to face in the way of trouble: Hard choices, crooked moods and brokenness; and there would be stunning fresh air, with bits of success and a lifeline in the midst of shame or danger. Take heart as you take life more seriously. The Word is trustworthy. Receive it, now.

Amen.