

Sermon for 5 March 2023 @ Bethesda UMC/Baltimore

Second Sunday in Lent

Scriptures: Genesis 12:1-4a; Psalm 121 (UMH 844, *response 3*); Romans 4:1-5, 13-17; John 3: 1-17

### ***“Us and them”***

Today is the second Sunday in our six-week “retreat” known as Lent.

I’m reminded by some scholar that Lent doesn’t include Sundays. Sundays are always focused on the resurrection, regardless of what part of the Christian year calendar they’re in.

Anyway, I interpret Lent, not simply as a time of giving something up, or even just of repentance. I don’t see the Christian life as focused on repentance. Repentance is always part of our life as followers of Jesus, but I certainly don’t interpret his central message as chiefly an urge to repent, but an urge to rejoice. That, as I understand it, is why he gravitated to the less-than-righteous, the sinners, the ones who seemed more needy than upright. What’s that quotation about, “I ... “or “the son of man”... “came not to save the righteous, but sinners...”? Here we have to pause and remember that the Bible isn’t a recording of Jesus’ literal words, but a gathering up, from many sources, of memories, and this after years of living with the sequel to his ignominious death by the ruling Romans, and then translated over many centuries, with lots of theological conferences arguing over single words, such as the phrase that still separates all the Eastern Orthodox churches from the Roman Catholic Church and its Protestant descendants, something about “homo-ousian,” which in Greek means “proceeding from the father” or “from the father and the son” ... something we never have settled about the Holy Spirit...or such-like.

Anyway, on this Sunday of Lent, and in the week before this Sunday when we use the texts for this Sunday as our study-and-prayer guides ... the Bible gives us lovely, encouraging scriptures.

But they all have a “kicker,” as Bill would say. They all say “We believe,” or “You have to believe.” And that, brothers and sisters, has always given me pause. Not because I don’t struggle every day to believe in a good God and a redeemable world. Not because I don’t see clearly that I have a choice between believing that and not. Not that God gives the possibility to the guy in prison for murder to make something of his or her life ... not that that shouldn’t be the aim of any jail term, which we’re a long way from making as possible as our friends in some countries like Norway and Sweden are already doing ...

What gives me pause is how easy it is to give John’s Jesus the appearance of saying, “We know how to do it, and you all don’t. We’re special, and that means you aren’t.”

It’s always been a case for me. It’s why I never thought of going into the ministry until I flunked out of medical school and went into a depression, and only tried seminary when a retired professor saw me faithfully attending Wesley Foundation fellowship @ the University of

Arkansas and suggested I go down to theological school at Dallas over the Christmas holidays and see if they had anything I might be interested in investigating for a career.

And that feeling of being an outsider around believers has never left me. I always see the flavor of pride in those folks who know Jesus is Lord .... And when I got into seminary, the professors told us church history was a sorry mess of many people doing just that, king after king and crusade after crusade ... and when I saw the veterans just not interested in talking about the war, as though the "greatest generation" was basically not interested in the details of winning an ugly and disgusting contest that nobody was all that decent in... all my life I've hesitated to say "Hallelujah" too much, because the next morning I feel like a hypocrite, and turn myself over to Jesus again, and wait until, like John Wesley, I get "surprised by joy" and my gloomy mood lifts again...

I know this is dreadfully personal, but like Wesley, I have to be "strangely warmed," I have to be reconvinced, and to reconvince myself, of the glory that surrounds me and all creation. All my adult life I've had to put myself in touch with people and disciplines that open me to recovery from guilt and shame ... from despair.

And right now, I see that as particularly relevant to preaching and living by Christ, with Christ, in Christ. Paul pushes it in the Romans passage for today. Moses himself, in insisting the Israelites, suffering under Pharaoh, were God's chosen people, and that God would kill off other nations and make them great, does the same thing.

It's dangerous business to teach your kid she's the greatest. It risks separating him from the rest. It makes Cain jealous.

Can we do something about that?

Can we let God translate our joy into service? Not service as a job, but a privilege, a bond, a therapy, a uniter, among the families of the earth?

That's my question for us, this second Sunday of Lent, this week when the young ruler comes to Jesus to try to understand, and the answers John has him give go so far beyond quotations that we can only call them ... what? The voices of the universe. .... The Word of God (not in terms of the English translation, not a written message, but the essence of reality. When I take deep breaths, when I wait awhile, but don't give up trying ... when I do my best to avoid addiction, when that moment comes, which so far it always does, because I'm incredibly lucky, I live among basically loving people in a relatively safe moment of history... and I can see the light, and recognize it doesn't separate me from other people, but gives me more understanding and levels me and all the rest of us on one plane of benefit.. and moves me and some others to expand that playing field to those who aren't so fortunate ... then, as Wesley said, "I felt ... I feel ... my heart strangely warmed, " and the song starts up again, and love abounds.

It's no longer us and them. It's only us. One great family, as so many people have put it ... and buy no means just Christians. Just us. Amen.