

SERMON, LENT I – 2021

Here we are at Lent again. This will be my 50th Lent in this congregation – my 15th as priest. What in the world can we say – what can *I* say -- about Lent that's new? Is it time once again to give up a vice or take up a virtue? Do we talk about our own times in the wilderness as something we must simply work through, or do we talk about the opportunities for blessings in the peace, quiet, and aloneness of the times in the wilderness which we encounter?

What can we say about Lent?

In particular what can we say about Lent and what should be on our mind during this peculiar time toward the end – we pray – of this pandemic.

I was raised in a faith tradition that talked about sin a lot – not just during Lent (which we did not observe), but pretty-much all the time! And there were lots of ways to sin! That tradition said that going to movies was sin. So was dancing or drinking, or gambling, or smoking or card-playing.

And I could never understand what that had to do with anything, particularly sin.

Our faith tradition, our catechism defines “sin” as the seeking of our own will instead of the will of God, thus distorting our relationship with God, with other people, and with all creation.

In short, sin is what separates us from God — and what may isolate us from community. Not necessarily -- or even most likely -- having that second scotch or overeating.

What separates us from God generally separates us from one another, as is made obvious by the pain, anger, and frustration that is affecting our political society during this pandemic. Based on my own experience, I believe this Lent calls me to a much closer examination of my own thoughts and attitudes, not just doing an inventory of my overt and outward conduct

I know I'm not the only preacher who has used this Covid 19 pandemic as a sermon metaphor, and the metaphor certainly offers meaning in Lent. In fact, it's difficult not to think of our own wanderings in this wilderness when we think of Jesus' forty days in the desert. And it's only a small jump from there to ponder the wanderings of the Nation of Israel during those 40 long years in the desert wilderness.

For Christians, Lent is usually thought of as a personal journey of self-examination and repentance. But I submit to you that during *this* pandemic, *this* Lent, we all need to extend out self-examination to our role as citizens of this country. What should we have learned and what should we examine about our experiences this past year?

For the best part of the last nine or ten months, we've allowed the leadership of our nation to drive us into a virtual circular firing-squad of violence, intimidation, scorn, ridicule, and anger. These are ingredients for political disaster which threaten to tear our nation apart, not to mention our communities and sometimes our families.

As I reflected on the situation, I realized that, on an emotional level, I've been part of the problem, not the solution. Not because I've been actively involved, or even vocal – aside from a yelling at the T.V. – but because I've been angry most of the time, and despondent the rest. This is not surprising; it hurts to see something you love torn apart.

In addressing the events of January 6th, Presiding Bishop Michael Curry directed us toward Abraham Lincoln as he spoke during his second inauguration in 1865, "Lincoln knew in that moment, in the moment of a national crisis, a moment of great danger, that such a moment was a

moment of decision, when a nation, when a people must decide who shall we be? What kind of nation, what kind of people shall we be?”¹

Who shall we be? Too many of our politicians who address our national situation sound more like the self-righteous Pharisee in Jesus’ parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector, finding fault only with the other side, while pretending to be have none of their own. Remember his words? “God, I thank you that I am not like other people . . . “

If I’m forced to admit it, I’m probably not so different – and I doubt if I am the exception. That’s why national self-examination and repentance begins with our own personal introspection. The violence and disruption during this past year is, no doubt, a sin. While sin is the human condition, it is not the only option, and the only answer to that is repentance and God’s forgiveness -- and community.

What kind of people shall we be? The Presiding Bishop had us look at The Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. at a time when the civil rights struggle had achieved many victories, but as the nation declined into foreign war and internal strife and bitterness:

We were at war in another country, but there was war on our streets. The nation was deeply divided. Cities burned. There were riots. Riots at national conventions of political parties. The future of the nation was in question, and it was at that time that Dr. King realized that in moments of danger, a decision must be made. And he titled his last book, *Where Do We Go from Here: Chaos or Community.*” Bishop Michael continues, “I believe, as he believed, as Abraham Lincoln believed, as I believe you believe, that we must choose community. Chaos is not an option. Community is our only hope.”²

To become community once again, we must regain our perspective.

¹ Word to the Church, January 8, 2021

² Ibid.

In the wilderness, Jesus had to decide and define what sort of Messiah he was going to be. Would he carve out a role on his own, claiming power and authority for Himself, or would he yield Himself to his Father and our Creator. Perhaps many of us have personal gods of anger or distrust that keep us from engaging God and our fellow man on the terms that God would hope for us. What grudges, political or otherwise, are we harboring against one another? What is going on in our lives that separates us from time to time from the worship of God, and the sharing of Christ in our community? What is it that preoccupies our thoughts so as not to acknowledge the good things in our life and holds us back from proclaiming the Good News of Jesus Christ?

Perhaps someone has hurt or angered us, and they don't even know it happened? Are we holding a grudge against someone because of what they believe – or what we merely *think* they believe? Just what is it that makes our life with God incomplete? What is it that keeps us from seeing the need for love and compassion for those in the world around us? What personal gods do we worship in place of the One God?

What kind of nation, what kind of people shall we be? The Nation of Israel had forty years in the wilderness to figure out what they would be. Taking a look at their time in that wilderness, it's a wonder they came out of the wilderness on the other side intact. Complaints about the food, grumbling against leadership, open rebellion, false worship, disobedience of God Himself. But they did make it, an imperfect community, but a community never-the-less.

Are we, here in our own wilderness, going to decide on our own what sort of Christians we are going to be? Are we to make our own decisions for our life, for our neighbors, our nation, and our church community based on our own personal gods, whether they be greed, laziness, envy, anger, pride, -- or whatever? Or are our decisions and actions going to be based on the

Word and Love of God? That is not only the challenge of Lent, but also the challenge of our entire journey as Christians. As we continue this journey, let us all continue to evaluate what sort of Christians we are becoming. And what kind of nation we will become.

We begin, both as individuals and a nation, with the acknowledgment that sin after all, is the human condition. Like the comic strip character Pogo of many years ago, as a nation we must be able to say, “we have met the enemy and it is us!” As an individual, we must be able to say, “I have met the enemy and he is me!” It is not just “who shall we be?” When you get down to basics, it is always “who shall *I* be.”

Presiding Bishop Curry went on to say this:

I am a follower of Jesus of Nazareth because I believe that his way of love and his way of life is the way of life for us all. I believe that unselfish, sacrificial love, love that seeks the good and the welfare and the well-being of others, as well as the self, that this is the way that can lead us and guide us to do what is just, to do what is right, to do what is merciful. It is the way that can lead us beyond the chaos to community.³

Jesus came out of the desert resolved to do his father’s bidding, even if it meant the Cross. Israel came out of the desert resolved to create a new nation in a new land, even if it meant generations of struggle. What will our nation become as it emerges from the pandemic? That’s really up to its people, isn’t it? What will we be? All of us.

And what will you and I be as we emerge from our own time in this particular desert through which we all have been walking?

I could do no better in closing this sermon with the words which concluded Presiding Bishop Curry’s remarks:

³ Id. at note 1

I would ask you to do two things. I'm asking you to make a commitment, a renewed commitment, to live the way of love as Jesus has taught us and to do it by making a commitment to go out and bless somebody. Bless somebody you disagree with. Bless somebody you agree with. But to go out and bless somebody by helping somebody along the way. Go out and bless somebody by listening to their story and their life. To go out and be an instrument of God's peace, an agent of God's love.

Amen. So be it. Let it be done.