



March 2025
Sermons
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Rio Rancho Presbyterian Church

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Rio Rancho, NM

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MOUNTAIN TOP EXPERIENCES

Luke 9: 28-36

We are not sure where it happened. Perhaps atop Mount Hermon or Mount Tabor-two peaks in northern Israel. Now the Franciscans chose to build their Church of the Transfiguration atop Mount Tabor in 1924. The writer of II Peter 1:15 calls it “the holy mountain.” It was a secluded place, a place for prayer. It became a place for revelation, where God pulled back the curtain and allowed mere mortals to see something of the divine. Here three disciples-Peter, James, and John-saw awesome sights and heard astonishing words. It was indeed a holy mountain.

We know it followed climatic events around Caesarea Phillip. There Peter had confessed that Jesus was the Christ, even if he could not bear a suffering Christ. Soon thereafter, Luke says eight days, Jesus took his inner circle with him atop the mountain. So why just three? Why not all twelve? Perhaps the best we can say is that in Israel not all were allowed to enter the Holy of Holies, but only one high priest per year. Here only three enter the Holy of Holies on the holy mountain.

Luke tells us Jesus' three friends arrived at the top of the mountain and promptly fell asleep. No doubt it was a steep climb. Anybody would be tired after such a hike. On top of that it was probably getting dark. Jesus wanted his closest friends with him on the mountain top to join him in prayer. As they would at Gethsemane, his would-be prayer partners fall asleep. While they slept, Jesus prayed.

And then it happened, as mysterious an event as any in the amazing life of Jesus. Jesus' face began to shine. Then his clothes became dazzling white. Here we need inspired imagination-lighting and eerie music to underscore the presence of the divine. In a place of serene silence, the awesome mystery of God descends upon Jesus and transfigures him.

And that is not all. Standing with Jesus now are two ancient heroes of the faith-Moses and Elijah. This is a scene combining the best from the Twilight Zone and Close Encounters of the Third Kind. In this splendid moment, the three visit about Jesus' upcoming exodus, his departure in Jerusalem. Within the glory from above, they talk of the shame ahead.

Perhaps Moses and Elijah seek to console him, they who knew deep suffering in their own lives. They console him as will angels in

the Garden of Gethsemane. They comfort the transfigured Son of God.

Then the three show themselves to be, yet again, disciples without a clue. They stumble all over themselves as they wipe the sleep from their eyes. Peter imagines they could build three shrines so as to prolong the moment. Luke notes that Peter said this without realizing what he was saying. In the presence of the holy the best advice is simply this: “Let all the earth keep silence before him.”

Then God himself provides a dwelling place for Jesus, Moses and Elijah. A cloud, a thick cloud overshadows them and conceals them. From the cloud a mighty voice proclaims: “This is my Son, my Chosen One. Listen to him.” Then in a twinkling of the eye, the cloud disappears whisking Moses and Elijah away. Now Luke tells us the three disciples “kept silence.” Did the disciples bow in silent adoration? They should have.

And so should we whenever we have a mountain top experience. Have you ever shuddered in silence before the holy mystery of life? Did you want to kneel in silent adoration?

That is what the psychologist Abraham Maslow called a “peak experience.” In his classic text **Religion, Values and Peak**

Experiences Maslow described those profound moments that leave an indelible mark upon our souls. Maslow interviewed hundreds of people and asked them a simple question: “What has been the most ecstatic moment in your life?” Most people were quite embarrassed to answer. Scientifically trained people were especially shy about their peak experiences.

But Maslow did hear from many people about their ecstatic experiences. Would it surprise you that two things rose to the top: music and sex. Maslow himself said that his peak experiences involved getting married, having their first child, and undergoing psychoanalysis. For Maslow, there are so many ways up the mountain, but the view from the top is the same.

How did people feel about these peak experiences? First, they felt fortunate, graced. A common phrase used was: “I don’t deserve this.” So they felt immense gratitude, like they had encountered a gift from above. Surely the three disciples felt that same gratitude.

Second, in peak experiences people report feelings of wonder, awe, reverence, surrender, and even worship before the beauty of that moment. Some felt transported into heaven or being granted a vision of heavenly things. Surely Peter, James and John felt utter reverence before the glorified Son of God.

Third, peak experiences produce profound aftereffects, even radical change. In this transcendent moment one's whole life may be transformed. People began to care more deeply than they ever have before. That does not mean a person becomes morally or spiritually perfected. But the person is marked forever by this moment, like the three disciples must have been.

Finally, peak experiences create humility within a person, one with greater receptivity, a greater readiness to listen and hear. Those who have never smelled the roses or heard the birds sing or seen the sun set suddenly become observant and appreciative. Surely the three became more receptive after seeing that vision and hearing that divine voice.

So a peak experience, according to Maslow, helps us become more grateful, more reverent, more caring, more humble. Indeed, our lives are transfigured in a profound way.

Sisters and brothers, in these difficult and turbulent times, maybe we all need a peak experience. In Exodus 24 God calls Moses and the leadership of Israel to the mountain top to eat and drink before the Lord. The text says they "beheld the Lord" no doubt in a very mysterious way. Not everyone is called to the mountain top to see the Lord, as did the leadership of Israel and Jesus' closest

disciples. Oh that we could all have such a peak experience! How transformative that would be, indeed!

But we can all “touch the hem of the garment” whenever we approach the Table of our Lord. As we share in the bread and the cup, we are invited to hear the divine voice speak to us again, “This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him.” And what Christ would say to you at this table? “You are my dear child. I have given my life for you. I ask only that you receive this bread and cup and share in my life. Become my disciple yet again. Bow before me in silence and awe. And give me your heart.”

If you hear that voice, surely this will be a peak moment for you. Your mountain top experience in the presence of Christ who loved you and gave himself for you, that you may give yourself to him. Thanks be to God. Amen.

Rio Rancho Presbyterian Church

Rev. Frank Yates

Rio Rancho, NM

March 9, 2025

ANGELS AND DEVILS

Luke 4: 1-13

Some years ago Waylon Jennings, Willie Nelson and some good ole Texas boys began singing what they called “Outlaw Country.” Now one of those good ole boys was Billy Joe Shaver from Waco. You know he’s a good ole boy because of that name: “Billy Joe.” He wrote a classic “Outlaw Country” song about giving in to temptation. This is the key verse: “The devil made me do it the first time, the second time I did it on my own.” That’s called splitting the difference, giving the devil his due and then owning the rest.

Now the Bible is filled with devils and angels. These supra-human beings appear in the temptation story of Jesus. So what are we to do with these supra-human beings? Well, there are many ways to interpret the Bible’s language about

the devil or Satan. Consider what we would call the left, middle, and right-wing positions.

The left wing is anchored by Rudolf Bultmann. This German New Testament scholar said that the Bible's talk of the devil was part of the dualistic mythology of the First Century. According to Bultmann, contemporary readers can make no sense of a personal devil fighting against God. Such language needs to be de-mythologized and reinterpreted using Existentialist terminology. Thus, contemporary readers understand human caused evil, but there are no devils, demons or Satan. Period. The left wing.

Now the middle position is anchored by Paul Tillich, yet another German theologian. Tillich used the word "demonic" often in his theology. But he defined the demonic as "the claim of anything finite to be infinite in its own right." Tillich saw the demonic to be human sin writ large in society. Like personal greed that becomes embedded in a cut-throat economic system. The middle position.

The right wing is anchored by C.S. Lewis. His book **The Screwtape Letters** was written during World War II, a time of immense evil launched by the Third Reich. Lewis wrote the following about his views: “There are two opposite errors about devils. One is to disbelieve in their existence. The other is to believe they exist and then have an excessive and unhealthy obsession with them.”

Though Lewis believed quite literally in the existence of the devil, he was convinced the devil is not a power opposite to God, but a power opposing the archangel Michael. Interestingly, Lewis wished he had written another book to balance *The Screwtape Letters*, a book about Michael giving advice to our guardian angels for our encouragement. So that is the right-wing position.

Now if none of those options work for you, no worries. I have others. In our time the New Testament scholar Walker Wink wrote a trilogy of books about evil. In **Naming the Powers** (1984), **Unmasking the Powers** (1986) and **Engaging the Powers** (1992) Wink mirrors Tillich’s view that

the demonic is human evil writ large. He defines the “principalities and powers” in the Ephesian letter as both visible and invisible forces of evil. Remember how Ephesians 6 phrases it: “Our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, authorities, cosmic powers of this present darkness, against spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.” Wink suggests these invisible forces become quite visible and toxic in corporate cultures and popular prejudices. These principalities and powers become embodied in systems and structures of evil. Think of drug cartels.

Or consider Elaine Pagels who wrote the 1995 classic entitled **The Origin of Satan**. One of her reasons for writing this book came from suffering two devastating losses. In 1987 her six-year-old son died of a rare disease. The next year her husband of twenty years died tragically in a mountain climbing accident. As part of her self-therapy, she wondered how people deal with such loss.

Pagels found that getting angry at God made no sense to her. But she took comfort in the fact that some Christians in the early church raged against Satan. That she could understand since Satan was the presumed source of so much evil and suffering in the world. Pagels notes that “liberal Christians would say the devil is irrelevant. But that is not so. The dramatic tension of the whole Jesus story would not work without this devil figure.” Especially the Temptation story and the exorcism scenes.

So this is how Pagels came to understand Satan. She interprets the figure of Satan as the instigator of suffering and those who cause suffering. Those with whom we are angry for causing suffering we demonize and call them “Satanic”. I, for one, am quite willing to call Vladimir Putin “Satanic” for the suffering he has unleashed upon Ukraine.

So if you don’t like any of those options, no problem. I have more. In Karl Jung’s depth psychology, the devil becomes the shadow side of ourselves. For Jung, the devil is just the internal dark shadow of evil tempting all of us, evil

writ small within. In the movie “Jesus of Nazareth” Franco Zeffirelli offers a magnificent picture of the temptation scene. What Jesus rebukes is his own dark shadow cast on a moonlit night. That’s Jungian psychology at its best.

Now perhaps you are more into the twelfth chapter of the Book of Revelation, the story of Michael expelling Lucifer from heaven. Maybe John Milton in **Paradise Lost** was right all along. Did Lucifer rise up in heaven and cry out, “I would rather rule in hell than serve in heaven”?

Maybe your prefer the first two chapters of the book of Job where Satan is a cynical District Attorney who insists that Job is righteous because of the perks-the blessings. Remove the perks and he will curse God. So this Satan sees a dark cloud behind every silver lining. Satan the accuser.

Or maybe the devil is just the “Zeitgeist”. That’s a fancy German word that means “the spirit of the times”. All the hurtful ideologies, the cultural prejudices, the poisoned political posturing. Well, the list of possibilities for understanding Satan or the devil is quite long. This list would

be incomplete if I did not mention the opinion of a good friend of mine. He is quite convinced that the singer Madonna is the devil incarnate.

Well, I am sorry I cannot answer this question for you. Truthfully, I am still wrestling with all these possibilities after all these years. But I do think that Elaine Pagels is right that the dramatic tension in the Jesus story would not work without the devil. Consider the Temptation story as well as all the exorcisms of demons. It's all there in the Jesus story and thus you are called to interpret what you have read. What will you do with the devil, Satan and the demons?

For me, the more important question is this: Are we to see our own lives involving a profound struggle between good and evil, light and darkness, right and wrong? That is easy for me to answer. Of course, our lives are caught up in that struggle-both within our own hearts and in our dealings with others. And with the world, especially now in these deeply divisive times where truth and falsehood are locked

in a fierce struggle. Is that evidence that the Deceiver, the Father of Lies, is at work among us?.

So how should we visual our struggle? Are we to imagine an angel on one shoulder and a devil on the other? Should we say, “The devil made me do it the first time, the second time I did it on my own”? Or should we say with the letter of James, “But one is tempted by one’s own desire, being lured and enticed by it”? (James 1: 14) To put it another way, maybe most of our troubles are self-inflicted; our own desires become the demons lurking within. We bedevil ourselves.

Now when we consider the Temptation story itself, we discover how even good things can become a source of temptation. The Tempter becomes the Deceiver so that good things become twisted and distorted. Like bread, which we pray for daily. Our power, which can be used for constructive purposes. Or glory, the glory of God, the ultimate good. All these “goods” became subject to temptations for Jesus, who was alone and hungry in the wilderness. Stark evil is never

attractive, but the “good entwined in evil” can be quite alluring. Like quoting Scripture with evil intent. Finally, however, Jesus resists those temptations by appealing to the highest good-God alone. The One who insists that all lesser goods be surrendered in order to “worship the Lord your God and serve only him.”

So I want to end with some good news this morning. At the end of our text we read: “When the devil had finished every test, he departed from Jesus until an opportune time.” Now Matthew and Mark have a better ending. They say, “The devil left him and behold angels came and ministered to him.” Angels came and comforted Jesus. I wonder if they brought him bread to eat. After all, he had fasted for forty days and was famished. In my mind, I see Jesus in the wilderness breaking bread with his angelic companions. Just as Abraham and Sarah shared bread with those three angelic visitors under the Oaks of Mamre (Gen 18).

And this is the really good news of the temptation story. In the words of Abraham Lincoln, “the better angels of our

nature” triumphed. The three demonic temptations were rebuffed and the devil departed, while angels gathered around Jesus.

Remember this. The devil quotes from Psalm 91: “God will command his angels concerning you to protect you. On their hands they will bear you up so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.” While the devil twisted those good words to tempt Jesus to throw himself off the pinnacle of the temple, let’s remember how those words were intended. To give us courage and hope in dark times. To remember in the difficult moments that angels of which we are often unaware will bear us up in their loving arms. With their amazing grace, they hold us tenderly amidst the turbulence and the sorrow. “Behold, angels came and ministered to him.” May they comfort you as well on your Lenten journey. May it be so. Amen.

Rio Rancho Presbyterian

March 16, 2025

Rio Rancho, NM

Rev. Frank Yates

FRYING PAN TO FIRE

Luke 13: 31-35

Jesus must have felt caught between the frying pan and the fire. In Galilee the Pharisees inform him that King Herod Antipas wanted to kill him. This was the same Herod Antipas who had already beheaded his cousin John the Baptist. So the rabbi from Nazareth found himself a wanted man in the frying pan that was Galilee.

But then Jesus looked ahead to what awaited him in Jerusalem-the prophet's fate at the hands of evil forces. There before him the fire that would consume him. So between the frying pan and the fire, Jesus faced deadly opposition wherever he turned. There was no "City of Refuge" for Jesus. Indeed, he "came into his own and his own received him not." He had no place to hide.

The leaders who put the squeeze on Jesus were a sorry lot, indeed. Like so many in authority, they abused their power and harmed anyone who stood in their way. Herod Antipas the king,

Caiaphas the High Priest, and Pontius Pilate the Roman governor all conspired together in Jerusalem to do away with Jesus.

But their privileged position was not to last. Within a decade of Jesus' execution, all three leaders would be run out of office. In the year 36 A.D. Caiaphas and Pilate were relieved of their duties. Three years later in the year 39 A.D. Herod Antipas was removed and banished to what we now call France. They did indeed "strut and fret their hour upon the stage" only to exit into obscurity.

So Jesus considered his tenuous position in his home district of Galilee. And he calls out Herod Antipas, "Go and tell that fox that I will work miracles until I finish my time here." In other words, Jesus would not flee from Herod's jurisdiction until his work was done proclaiming the coming Kingdom of God and healing those in need. He would leave the frying pan of Galilee when the seed had been planted and not before.

But then Jesus turned his face toward Jerusalem and lamented the opposition he would encounter in the City of David. He saw the fire ahead, the suffering and rejection in a city that stones the prophets. He uttered this painful word of lamentation, "Jerusalem, Jerusalem! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, but you were not

willing.” Jesus knows that no prophet is acceptable in his own country-neither in his home district nor in the capital city. And he laments.

Lamentation is a cry of sorrow over the sins and suffering in the world. We lament those too blind to see and too cold to care. We lament leaders who feel threatened by anyone and everyone and then lash out in anger. We lament a “town without pity” that rejects those who speak the truth.

Jesus is brokenhearted for the city that he loves with a mother’s love. How he would have gathered this brood under the wings of God’s love. But these frightened children hid themselves from God like Adam and Eve in the Garden. And worse, they turned upon the very One who loved them the dearest. Greater love has no one than this, that they lay down their lives for those who despise them. What a poignant and sorrowful thought!

The scholar Walter Brueggemann has taught us the importance of voicing to God our lamentation. Like crying out to God when suffering under Egyptian bondage. Or Jesus’ sorrow over the bullies determined to end his life. Lamentation gives public voice to our personal pain and unites us in solidarity with all who bear the mark of suffering.

Today in our country and indeed the world many feel squeezed in the current political climate. Federal workers losing their jobs, many of whom are veterans. Our allies worrying about a trade war as well as the hot wars around our world. People of color stressing about their standing in our society. Retirees watching their 401k's shrink. Immigrants facing detention and deportation. Gay, lesbian and transgendered citizens feeling threatened. Dissidents in peril for lifting their voices in protest. Those out of step with the prevailing political winds now feel under siege. It is a cause for lamentation for all the uncertainty, anxiety and fear. We lament what seems like a sophisticated form of bullying.

All this reminds me of my own adolescence, a time of stress for many young people. The frying pan and the fire of my middle school was the merciless kidding, endless ridicule, and relentless bullying. All pretty much unchecked by the school authorities.

Now I had two classmates who were polar opposites. Fred was simply a bully from day one in the first grade. Bobby, on the other hand, was the quintessential nerd, as we now say. Fred never let up on Bobby, year after year making fun of this brilliant but strange young man. Bobby would become our high school valedictorian and later a star in Silicon Valley, as you would expect.

But Fred kept goading and humiliating Bobby up until the eighth grade. Now long ago and far away at Hogg Junior High School in Tyler, Texas, there was a curious custom. Any two students could ask the coaches to let them duke it out with oversized boxing gloves. The idea, I suppose, was to stop schoolyard fights and bring the conflict under the control of the coaches.

So Bobby, a large but very awkward eighth grader, publicly challenged Fred to a boxing match in the gym. Fred of course thought it was a joke. But it was not a joke and sure enough at noon virtually the entire school gathered in the gym for the battle of the bully and the nerd. Fred sneered at his lumbering opponent, but Bobby was determined. This would be one of the most stunning days of my adolescence.

Why? Because Bobby with those oversized boxing gloves knocked Fred out before our unbelieving eyes. All the years of pent-up rage came out in Bobby's wild swings. And one of those ungainly punches landed solidly on Fred's exposed jaw. And the bully dropped like a rock on the gym floor. I don't think Fred ever messed with Bobby again.

Now I am not necessarily advocating this as a means of dealing with bullying and school yard fights. All I know is that when young

hearts are humiliated and bullied, we all suffer. Some who've been bullied return to their schools with weapons and carry out their revenge. And then we all weep for the young lives lost and ruined forever.

There is a poignant song about bullying entitled "Don't Laugh at Me". I hope you will go online and see the music video produced by its author Mark Wills. This is a lamentation for all those who have been bullied-for my classmate Bobby and all those being bullied even to this day. Here are the lyrics of this haunting lament:

I'm a little boy with glasses, the one they call the geek

A little girl who never smiles, cause I've got braces on my teeth

And I know how it feels to cry myself to sleep.

I'm that kid on every playground who's always chosen last

A single teenage mother tryin' to overcome my past

You don't have to be my friend, is it too much to ask?

Don't laugh at me, don't call me names

Don't get your pleasure from my pain

In God's eyes we're all the same

Someday we'll all have perfect wings

Don't laugh at me.

I'm the cripple on the corner you pass me on the street

I wouldn't be out here begging if I had enough to eat

And don't think that I don't notice that our eyes never meet.

I'm fat, I'm thin, I'm short, I'm tall

I'm deaf, I'm blind, hey aren't we all?

Don't laugh at me, don't call me names,

Don't get your pleasure from my pain

In God's eyes we're all the same

Someday we'll all have perfect wings

Don't laugh at me.

The church of Jesus Christ is where we raise our lamentations for all those who are bullied. And by God's grace we wrap our loving arms around them, for the sake of Christ our Lord, who faced the frying pan and the fire, the bullies who did him in. Lord, have mercy. Christ, have mercy. Lord, have mercy upon us. Amen.

Rio Rancho Presbyterian Church

March 23, 2025

Rio Rancho, NM

Rev. Frank Yates

THE CARE AND NURTURE OF YOUR SOUL

Luke 13: 1-9

It's spring. It's Lent. Time to tend to your garden. Time to tend to your soul. In our reading from the Gospel this morning, Jesus combines the two-tending your garden and your soul. Both have to do with life, productive life.

Only Luke tells us the parable of the unproductive fig tree. A man plants a fig tree in his vineyard and waits three years for that tree to produce. But there is nothing, not any figs. So he tells the vineyard keeper, "Cut it down. Why should it use up the ground?" But the vineyard keeper responds, "Sir, give it another year while I fertilize it and water it. Let's see what happens. But next year if there are no figs, then let's go ahead and cut it down."

Now we all know that in a vineyard there is competition for the nutrients in the soil. Perhaps this fig tree needed more fertilizer and water than it was getting. Now with just the right amount of both, there would be a chance for that fig tree to produce.

Now we don't know the rest of the story. What did the fig tree do the following year? We can only speculate, but we tend to supply the answer with our basic orientation toward life. If we assume that things never really change, then I suppose we figure that fig tree was a goner. But if we believe that unexpected things are possible, then we imagine eating figs off that tree the following year. Your perspective, should we call it your faith, does matter here.

So Jesus' parable is about a fig tree that was barren for three years. Maybe like your own life in some respects. Have you ever endured a spiritual slump, an off season for your soul? A lean time, a sparse time, a hard time for your spirit? An extended "dark night of the soul"? Maybe you are going through such a time right now. It seems those seasons visit all of us sometime.

It is hard to explain to someone else exactly what that feels like. God seems so distant and disconnected from your life. Your relationship with Christ seems oh so vague. Prayer seems flat and uninteresting. Worship becomes mere ritual without feeling. Even the relationships with your nearest and dearest bore you. As the old song says, you are "running on empty." It's three years without a fig. It's a season without joy.

Thankfully, this parable suggests that there is hope for that barren fig tree. The vineyard keeper says, “I will dig around it, water it, put fertilizer on it and see what happens.” In other words, that tree needs extra care and nurture. That tree requires special attention, all in the hope that figs are just around the corner. The tree is not cut down. The tree is cared for. And so should we for our own souls.

During Lent we remind ourselves that the spiritual disciplines of the church are precisely for your soul’s welfare. Sometimes we simply need to go back to the basics, the nutrients that feed our souls. Let me ask you a couple of questions, not to make you feel guilty, but to make you feel hopeful. These questions are asked in the spirit of the vineyard keeper who refused to give up on that fig tree. And I

think Christ refuses to give up on any of us, however unfruitful we may have become.

So here are some questions for your Lenten self-inventory. First, when is the last time you read your Bible? Read it meditatively, expectantly, read it without interruption, seeking a living Word for your own life? Read it in the privacy of your own home, quietly and slowly? Now I don't think the Bible is like Aladdin's lamp that you rub and a genie comes out to grant us three wishes. Rather the Bible is more like an ancient text that the Spirit of God can still use to provide living water for your thirsty spirit. Maybe that is why we need to offer a prayer for illumination for the Spirit's inspiration.

I would suggest that during Lent you consider reading through Luke's Gospel, the finest of the four in my opinion. Read the Good News of Jesus' words and works and relationships. Read all about his life, his journey to Jerusalem, his death and then his resurrection. It is the best-told tale of the best news humans have ever heard. It is still the greatest story ever told, one that can inspire us and motivate us. Maybe even lift our spirits and make the juices in our heart and mind come to life.

A second question. When is the last time you really prayed to the living God? Quietly, passionately, deliberately prayed to your Lord and Savior, who loves you with an everlasting love? When is the last time you poured out to God your anxieties, your worries, your illnesses, your strained relationships, your lost hopes? Really prayed, as

though Someone was really listening who truly cared?

Maybe it's time for a long walk to talk with God. Or a time of silence away from all the media and noise, alone with the God of your life. Or maybe get up early and watch the dawn break in conversation with the One who knows every word before you speak it. Maybe it's time for some confession, some healing. Or a time for gratitude and thanksgiving, a time for reclaimed joy.

A third question. What are you doing with your life? How about this? Do something with your life! Become more generous with your time and your treasure and your talents. Find a way to help someone older or younger who needs what you have to give. Reconnect with a friend, especially one who is hurting. Recommit to your church family, tell people you appreciate them and value them and are glad

they are in your life. Directly, face to face, or if you are too shy, an email or an actual handwritten letter! Tell them you love them, no, you really do love them.

Maybe you could reach out to folks who are quite different from you-ethnically or politically or theologically or economically or educationally. Maybe even share your faith. Rekindle your curiosity about the world and all its wonders and all its challenges. Walk away from the television and the computer and the cell phone. Listen to nature or listen to some great classical music. Start on your spiritual autobiography to share with those you love.

In other words, try something different, rather than that tired old rut that is simply a long, narrow grave. For the sake of your soul, do something with your life that gives you

meaning and gives meaning to others as well. Something for others, for the church, for the world, for our broken political system. This is your pastoral Lenten nudge: Do something for Christ's sake. Really!

Think of what your personal vineyard keeper wants to do for you. Dig around your soul. Water it. Ok, put some manure (or something comparable) on your soul. All to see if you will bear fruit. Fruit that will bring joy to others and joy to your own soul. And joy even to our Lord.

In her grand book **Amazing Grace** Kathleen Norris has a lovely essay entitled "Detachment". She tells how her husband David fell into a deep depression, a depression so severe that he was hospitalized for several weeks. During his hospital stay, Kathleen discovered that David had become

so disoriented that he had canceled their medical insurance. So now they faced the prospect not only of mental illness but also medical bankruptcy, which is the cause of almost 67% of all bankruptcies in America.

So Kathleen in her anxiety talked to a friend in New York City who asked her, “What are you doing for yourself? Are you seeing a counselor? Did you take something for your anxiety?” Kathleen responded, “No, I am ok. I have been praying the psalms.” Her friend asked her incredulously, “And that’s enough?”

And this is what Kathleen said, “The funny thing is that was enough. I was not praying the psalms alone but with the Benedictine sisters in my town. They had graciously taken me into their small convent near the hospital, offering me a

guestroom for as long as I needed it. There is no way I can measure the help they gave me. Not the least of it was providing my first occasion for laughter in many days.”

During David’s stay in the hospital, she had the opportunity to visit with one of the Benedictine sisters. They talked about the season of the year, which happened to be Lent. This sister had decorated the convent with spring flowers and lively colors. She explained, “Most of my life I have thought of Lent in terms of self-denial. Now I still fast but my reasons for fasting have changed. Now I think of Lent as a time of waiting and burgeoning hopes.”

In the fellowship of wonderful Benedictine sisters, her pastor, her church family, her extended family and friends, and a very helpful attorney, Kathleen Norris got through that

difficult Lenten journey. And so did her husband David. Her soul was fed daily by the praying of the psalms, the fellowship of sisters and brothers in Christ, and that “burgeoning hope” that expects even barren fig trees to bloom and bear fruit yet again.

The care and nurture of your soul is a matter of utmost importance. Whatever condition your soul is in, remember this: time and patience, tending and watering, care and nurture can make it flourish once again. For your sake and for the sake of Christ who loves you. This is our “burgeoning hope” this Lenten season. Thanks be to God. Amen.

Rio Rancho Presbyterian

March 30, 2025

Rio Rancho, NM

Rev. Frank Yates

THE FORGIVING FATHER

Luke 15: 1-2, 11b-32

In 1983 Henri Nouwen, the famous Catholic spiritual writer, was in the village of Trosly, France. He was spending a few months at L'Arche, a community for people with mental disabilities. Nouwen had just completed a six-week lecture tour across the United States speaking out against the violence in Latin America. He came to L'Arche physically and spiritually depleted. Nouwen admitted he was "anxious, lonely, restless and very needy." In a word, he was tired, dead tired.

One of his co-workers there invited Nouwen into her office. On the door a large poster was pinned. It was a reproduction of Rembrandt's masterpiece, The Prodigal Son. Nouwen being Dutch was of course interested in the most famous Dutch painter ever-Rembrandt. Now when Nouwen first saw the picture, he said, "I could not take my eyes away. I felt drawn by the intimacy of the picture, the old man touching the boy's shoulder. That picture reached me in a place where I had never been reached before."

Initially Nouwen identified with the prodigal, since he too was “exhausted from his long travels.” Describing the impact of the image upon him Nouwen noted, “It represents the ongoing yearning of the human spirit, the yearning for a final return, an unambiguous sense of safety, a lasting home.”

Three years later Nouwen had resigned his teaching position at Harvard and had joined the L’Arche community in Toronto. Before going there he was invited to tour the Soviet Union with friends. They made plans to visit Saint Petersburg to see the Hermitage, the world-famous art museum. Housed in the Hermitage is Rembrandt’s original painting of the Prodigal Son. On Saturday, July 26, 1986, at 2:30 the afternoon Henri Nouwen saw for the first time Rembrandt’s rendition of our text from Luke 15. Nouwen was amazed at the sheer size of the painting, eight feet tall and six feet wide. For two hours Nouwen stared in wonder and awe at this magnificent oil painting. I invite you to go online and see for yourself.

Five days later Nouwen returned to the Hermitage, and this time sat in a chair staring at the painting for four hours. Needless to say, it was a transformative moment. When he left, he vowed never to be without a reproduction of Rembrandt’s masterpiece. So when

he arrived in Toronto, the first thing he did was hang a reproduction of that painting in his office.

That painting inspired Nouwen to write his wonderful book **The Return of the Prodigal**. His book invites us to identify with all three of the parable's main characters: the prodigal, the elder son, and the father. It is easy to see why Nouwen at first identified with the prodigal, limping home from a far country. Just as Nouwen had found himself limping spiritually after his long tour of America. Both were depleted and exhausted.

It is odd that Rembrandt himself may have felt the same way in the Seventeenth Century as he painted this picture. At the end of his life Rembrandt was lonely and poor and depleted. In his youth he had lived large, very famous and very arrogant. As a painter he made lots of money which he spent lavishly. And through it all, he was a man exceedingly hard to get along with. He was filled with resentments and often a desire for revenge.

For all his gains, there were far many losses-he lost his beloved wife, his three sons and two daughters. He then had an unhappy affair, after which the woman was committed to an insane asylum and there died. Another woman with whom he had a relationship also died. He was involved in countless lawsuits and legal conflicts.

His popularity as a painter plummeted. He ended up essentially bankrupt, his paintings sold to pay off his many debts.

Yet, thankfully in his later years Rembrandt experienced a modicum of peace. He began to view the human condition with a more sympathetic eye. He had suffered much and now he began to paint the tragic dimensions of life, the heartaches and the heart breaks. In the last year of his life when he paints the prodigal son, Rembrandt had become the broken young man, on his knees, craving his father's warm embrace. He is the prodigal come home.

Although much of the attention of this parable and indeed the painting focuses on the prodigal son, Nouwen insists we must not forget the elder son. He stands over against his father and his brother in every sense of the word. He is censorious and aloof, angry and upset. Nouwen admits that as the oldest child in his own family he often resented his younger siblings, what they "got away with". Like many dutiful children, he often disguised his real feelings. For the older brother, it was a bitter pill indeed to see his younger brother receive such a lavish welcome.

You can hear it in his complaint that he has worked all those years without even one party. And now this younger brother who had wasted all his money "with prostitutes" is welcomed home with a

feast! The bitter invective shows that the older brother “no longer has a brother, nor any longer a father”. He too is lost in a far country, that dark world of resentment.

Now the real hero of this parable is of course the forgiving father. It appears that he already knew the gist of that best seller by Mel Robbins entitled “The Let Them Theory”. As that theory suggests, he relinquished control of his son, though it broke his heart. In contrast, I am reminded of one of my favorite jokes. What is the difference between a Rottweiler and a Jewish mother? Well, the Rottweiler eventually lets go! Likewise, this loving father lets go and his vagabond son wanders lost in a “far country”, far, far away from home.

But when this broken son returns, the father treated him like a beloved child. “This son of mine was dead and now he is alive; he was lost and now he is found.” So he called for the best robe in the house, a ring for his finger and sandals for his bare feet. And then the fattened calf was prepared and the merry making began. My son is found. My son is alive and home at last! “Amazing grace! How sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me. I once was lost, but now am found. Was blind, but now I see!”

The loving father embraces with unconditional love his son who ran away and seeks out his son who never left. His forgiveness extends to both equally-the kid who threw away everything and the kid who claimed he never got enough. He loves them both and invites them both to the celebration, the homecoming. And we are left wondering if the elder son ever showed up, ever was reconciled. Did he “ever come home”?

Nouwen came to realize in reflecting on this parable and Rembrandt's painting there is something beyond “the call to return”. It is the call to become like the father, the forgiving, loving and compassionate parent of both boys. Nouwen wrote this: “When I first saw Rembrandt's Prodigal Son, I could never have dreamt that becoming the repentant son was only a step on the way to becoming the welcoming father. I now see that the hands that forgive, console and offer a festive meal must become my own hands. Becoming the father is for me the surprising conclusion to all my reflections on this parable.”

Perhaps this is the ultimate summons of this Parable. It is about a young man who wanders off into a far country and returns broken and repentant. It is about an older son who stays at home and harbors his resentments against his brother and even his father.

But most of all, it is about a father who reaches out in forgiveness to both his errant sons, one who was lost and then found, the other who was lost and did not know it.

The challenge is to become like the God who loves us with an unconditional and everlasting love. The One who says to us, “Welcome home, my beloved child.” Thanks be to our God who “so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son that whoever believes in him would not perish but have everlasting life.”

Amen.