

February 22, 2015 The First Sunday in Lent
Sermon: A Place Of Deep Listening
Genesis 9: 8-17; Mark 1: 9-15

Our meditation this First Sunday in Lent is an invitation to mark the Season of Lent as a time of repentance, grace and renewal.

Traditionally, when we think of Lent, we think of giving something up. People may ask you what you have given up for Lent. AND, Lent is about giving up. We are encouraged to give up our false gods and our false selves and our false notions that we can make it on our own.

That is one part of the picture; the other part is the uncharted portion of Lent. This is the best part. It is about receiving gifts: the gifts of freedom, of knowing who we are, what we need and that we are not alone. It is a gift to have forty days to rediscover those healing and transforming gifts for ourselves and for one another. In order to do this, we give ourselves an opportunity to listen, really listen, deeply listen, to one another, to God and to the world around us.

Let's begin this listening by focusing on the questions—What is repentance, grace, and renewal? These were the words that drew Jesus to a place of deep listening. The place apart was a “wilderness” place which meant it was not a comfortable place to be but a necessary setting for Jesus to find himself and his relationship to the Divine One.

Let's listen to some definitions of the words that are our “key” words for focus. Even though our three words this morning are repentance, grace and renewal, I want us to begin with definitions of “sin.” Before there is repentance, there is the “sin” that is our own and that of our collective self.

As Martin Luther said wisely, *“The recognition of sin is the beginning of salvation.”*

What is sin?

Rita Nakashima Brock tell us from her book Journeys by Heart that *“sin is not something to be punished, but something to be healed. That we exist at all is a sign that the destructive relationships of our lives have not been final and that we have the responsibility of acknowledging our connectedness to others and our commitment to the creation of right relationships.”*

Benjamin Mays says that *“the sin of humanity asserts itself in racial pride, racial hatred, and persecution and in the exploitation of other races.”*

Reinhold Niebuhr says that *“all human sin seems so much worse in its consequences than in its intentions.”*

Moving to a lighter side....

Fyodor Dostoevsky (Crime and Punishment) *“Man grows used to everything, the scoundrel!”*

George Bernard Shaw (The Devil's Disciple) *"The worst sin against our fellow creatures is not to hate them, but to be indifferent to them: that's the essence of inhumanity."*

Henry David Thoreau (Journal) *"We cannot do well without our sins; they are the highway of our virtue."*

Garrison Keilor *"I'm not sure I'm in favor of repentance. Sinners are the ones who get the work done. A strong sense of personal guilt is what makes people willing to serve on committees."*

Mae West (My Little Chickadee) *"I generally avoid temptation, unless I can't resist it."*

So, we find Jesus in the wilderness with his temptations--- struggling with his humanity and possibly finding new awareness of the meaning of his sin. Would he resist the temptation to avoid naming it and find a different path? Would he go against what he knew in his heart of hearts was God's call to him, a call of turning, repentance, grace and renewal. He was in a place of deep listening, a call to listen to the questions and trust that God would guide him to answers for his life. Are his questions your questions?

What is "repentance?"

Martin Luther King, Jr, said *"We shall have to repent in this generation, not so much for the evil deeds of the wicked people, but for the appalling silence of the good people."*

Frederick Buechner in *Wishful Thinking* says, *"To repent is to come to your senses. It is not so much something you do as something that happens."*

Dale Irwin shares that, *"repentance is often represented as a task that we must perform rather than the gift that the Bible reveals it to be. True repentance is not something that we can perform by our own power. Rather, it is a gift of grace. It is the opportunity that God has opened before us to walk down a new pathway, to open up a new chapter in our lives, to experience the divine power in a new and unprecedented way."*

What is "grace?"

A state of mind that sees God in everything is evidence of growth in grace and a thankful heart.
(Charles Finney)

William Sloane Coffin experienced the death of his 24 year old son Alex and spoke to his congregation at Riverside Church in New York City shortly after the trauma of loss. He made reference to God's goodness and grace in his sermon:

And of course I know, even when pain is deep, that God is good. "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" Yes, but at least, "My God, my God"; and the psalm only begins that way, it doesn't end that way. As the grief that once seemed unbearable begins to turn now to bearable sorrow, the truths in the "right" biblical passages are beginning, once again, to take hold: "Cast thy burden upon the Lord and He shall strengthen thee"; "Weeping may endure for the night but joy cometh in the morning"; "Lord, by thy favor thou hast made my mountain to stand strong"; "For thou hast delivered my soul from death, mine eyes from tears, and my feet from falling"; "In

this world ye shall have tribulation, but be of good cheer; I have overcome the world"; "The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it."

And finally I know that when Alex beat me to the grave, the finish line was not Boston Harbor in the middle of the night. If a week ago last Monday, a lamp went out, it was because, for him at least, the Dawn had come. So I shall — so let us all — seek consolation in that love which never dies, and find peace in the dazzling grace that always is.

What is “renewal?”

Elie Wiesel (Five Biblical Portraits) speaks these words in reflection on the story in the book of Jonah.....“Every human being is granted one more chance....Just as God has the power to begin, we have the power to continue by beginning again and again.

In Genesis, one of our readings for this Sunday, the rainbow is an eternal sign of covenant, promise and hope. It seemed to come when it was needed most. Imagine that a flood has wiped the earth clean. Noah opens the window of the ark and the dove with the olive branch returns and lands on his finger. The ark is opened and the ramp leads into a new world.

The message is that the world will not be destroyed, no matter how bad things get and God’s blessing will always be upon life for renewal and regeneration. God said, “Here is the sign of the covenant I make between myself and you and every living creature with you for all generations. I set my bow in the clouds and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth.”

The gospel lesson from Mark teaches us that Jesus becomes that symbol of covenant as he immersed in the waters of baptism, prays and struggles with temptations and begins his public ministry to bring people closer to know this God of the covenant.

During the season of Lent, we also have opportunity for taking stock of where we are in relationship to God’s purposes for the world and for us. Lent is 40 days of thinking about the kind of world we have, the kind of world we think God wants, and the actions that will move us in the direction we choose.

Lent is time to step back and see life from a different perspective and be glad that we can begin again or have a second chance. What does this mean for you?

I’m grateful for a person I met in Vermont, an avid hiker and who gave me permission to share some of her thoughts about the importance of stepping off the path to reflect and gain perspective.

She asked, "Why is it that some lessons have to be taught over and over again, and then some days you just slip right back into the same old habits and have to learn those lessons all over again? I know that I get completely overwhelmed when looking at the sheer height of the mountain before me, yet when it's time to start hiking, I instead start running.

Then I wear down more easily and start hitting obstacles around every bend, getting frustrating by them, which takes my eye off the trail. I then start procrastinating, allowing myself to become discouraged ... I don't WANT to do the hard parts ... I take off on an easy side trail, yet the knowledge that I have to get to the top weighs down on me and then I realize I must slow down, step back, find a spot with a view away from the trail, and just journal. Just write. Just get it all out. Get a new perspective.

Today I'm grateful that despite the frustration of it all despite having similar lessons taught to me over and over ... I get a little closer to following that trail one step at a time, as opposed to running, each time I experience this lesson. I'm grateful for the moments that I allow myself to take a break and write it all out ... knowing that it will help me get through the tougher parts of the journey ... Slowly, but surely."

The woman's words I share with you are from a person who "rediscovered" life in the church after many years away from the church. She and her partner found a loving environment wanting for them, a faith community to call home.

For many, Lent is a time to help us find the courage to begin again. It is time to find the strength to hold on to a new life. It is the time to be committed to God's loving paths. Signs of promise, signs of hope, and signs of God's presence are all around us. We are grateful that the Lenten Season gives us time to stop and ask again, "What is sin, what is repentance, what is grace, what is renewal." Lent is a season of "deep listening," it is the season to let the old pass and the new be reborn.

May we close our meditation with these words from Thomas Troeger:

*Before the fruit is ripened by the sun,
Before the petals or the leaves uncoil,
Before the first fine silken root is spun,
A seed is dropped and buried in the soil.
Before we gain the grace that comes through loss,
Before we live by more than bread and breath,
Before we lift in joy an empty cross,
We face with Christ the seed's renewing death. Amen.*