

THE OTHER SIDE OF THE MOUNTAIN

Lent 1: Holding on...letting go

Luke 9:28-36; Luke 4:1-13

We celebrate Lent because we have to.

We simply *have* to.

It's a spiritual necessity.

If our aim is to journey toward wholeness, in Christ,

Lent is an essential part of that journey.

It's a needed Sabbath rest on the road to wholeness.

A stop-off, to step back, survey the landscape, take stock.

To cease our striving, for a season.

To quit grasping.

Lent is *not*, as many people seem to think,

a 40-day season to give up an earthly pleasure,

like chocolate, or dessert, or television.

Nothing *wrong* with that, of course.

That's a good discipline.

But we ought to be making good lifestyle choices

anytime of the year.

Giving up one vice or one luxury for 40 days

doesn't even come *close*

to the heart of the matter, concerning Lent.

In the church calendar, the season of Lent begins, appropriately,
right after Transfiguration Sunday.

When we cancelled for snow Feb. 7, it threw us off one week,

because we decided to use *that* service the *next* week,

and just skip what would have been Transfiguration Sunday.

Not a big deal.

Transfiguration was never a huge thing for Mennonites.

But I've appreciated that at Park View,

we have *often* taken that Sunday once a year,

to retell that Gospel story of the three disciples

being overwhelmed by the glory of God

being struck almost senseless by this shining vision

of Jesus, Moses, and Elijah on top of the mountain,

and wanting somehow to make it permanent,

and build three houses for these three divine beings.

I've appreciated that at Park View we make it a point each year

to reflect on, and celebrate,

those times where we have, quite *unexpectedly*,

seen the glorious, luminous face of God,

where we have met the holy, the divine.

So, not wanting to be derailed by a little bit of snow (or a *lot* of snow),

I decided to have us read two Gospel stories today—

the Transfiguration story we missed last week,

and the story we *usually* look at on the first Sunday in Lent—

the story of Jesus' temptations in the wilderness.

Somehow, it seems right to hold these two back-to-back,

whether a week apart, as usual,

or in the same service, as we're doing today.

The bright, shining Mount of Transfiguration

and the stark, barren wilderness of Temptation,

are two faces of the same reality.

God is equally present in both,

but is encountered in very different ways.

One without the other, is a story . . . half-told.

On the Mount of Transfiguration

we get a gleaming clear vision of this close connection

between heaven and earth.

But in the wilderness of Lent,

we're on the other side of this mountain.

Here we see the shadows of our humanity,

we muck around in our messy life at the foot of the mountain.

We might very well wish, like *Peter* did,

that we can hold on to these mountain-top visions of God's glory,

that we are sometimes blessed with.

I imagine, to some degree, we can all identify with Peter's bright idea

to build a shelter to house this divine glory.

For many centuries now,

churches have attempted to do exactly *that*—
institutionalize the divine,
make permanent and predictable the glory of God.

Lent is a season both for holding on . . . and letting go.

There are some things in life that are core
to who God called us to be,
and what God called us to do.

And there are some things in life—
even things that we strive after and cling to—
that are, at best, peripheral to God’s calling on our lives,
and might actually distract us from the life God intends.

Lent is a season to discern what is at the core,
and what distracts us from the core.

It’s a season to help us let go of those things we need to let go of,
and hold on to that which we need to hold on to.

That takes careful discernment,
and the support of a community of faith.

This act of letting go does not come naturally.

You know, it’s not only *infants*
who have a strong grasping instinct.

Long before a baby knows how to respond to other external stimuli
it knows how to grasp.

You just touch the palm of an infant,
and its fingers wrap tightly around,
refusing to let go.

Human beings may grow out of that physical instinct to grasp.
But our instinct to grasp in *other* ways, lasts our lifetime.

We do not by nature voluntarily let go
of what we think we need for happiness.

That is why Lent is a spiritual necessity.

That is why the church calendar asks us to set aside
today and the next five Sundays to celebrate this season.

Because we may not *do it* otherwise,
and it’s something we need to do.

It would be more to our *liking*

to give just a slight nod to Lent,
and then quickly move on to Easter,
to resurrection,
to joy and peace and victory.

But no. We need . . . to take . . . our time . . . with this season.

We need to slow down long enough
to gaze honestly into the shadows.

If we don’t, we cheapen the resurrection.

If we don’t go to the depths, we don’t get to the heights.

It’s as simple as this:

If we don’t do Lent, we sabotage Easter.

God’s wonderful *grace* and *salvation* and resurrection *power*
is all about God finding us in the *middle*
of our brokenness and sin and death,
in the middle of the wilderness,
and bringing us up into the light, into wholeness of life.

So these six Sundays of Lent are not just gloom and doom theology.

We won’t be beating ourselves down
with “what-a-worm-am-I” kind of thinking.

Yes, in our Ash Wednesday services last week
we *did* take time to remember that we are dust,
and to dust we shall return.

But we *remember* our sin and shadows and brokenness,
knowing that God’s *grace is*, and *will be*, sufficient for all our sins,
sufficient to transform us and bring us into the light.

You know, don’t you,

that the *Sundays* in Lent don’t count in the 40 days?

The days between Ash Wednesday and Easter add up to 40,
only if you skip the Sundays.

Each Sunday in Lent is a little feast in the middle of the fast.

We “break fast” on Sundays.

A spiritual breakfast so-to-speak.

In Lent, we rejoice when we come and worship each Sunday.

We give thanks. We praise.

But we praise in a minor key.

We’re a bit subdued

because we are more keenly aware
of the reality of sin and brokenness and shadows
that is part of life on the other side of the mountain.

Today's Gospel story of Jesus' temptations in the wilderness
is the story of an arduous spiritual workout for Jesus.
It's a story of Jesus deciding what to hold on to,
and what to let go of.

Jesus had just been baptized by John, in the Jordan River.
He has just been proclaimed, in public, by a voice from heaven
that he was the very Son of God, God's own *beloved*.
Then, *strangely*, at the very moment Jesus *should* have been
most ready to engage in his mission,
when he should have had the greatest clarity,
on the heels of this public affirmation and recognition,
the Holy Spirit sent him into the middle of nowhere.

We usually read this short story in Luke 4, and we miss the impact.
It's only 13 verses long, takes a minute to read.
But this was not a simple weekend in the Sinai,
with a pesky conversation with the devil thrown in.
Can we even *imagine* . . . what 40 days in the desert would be *like*?
The depth of suffering . . .
The excruciating physical and emotional and spiritual isolation. . .
The agony of being without anything—food, shelter, company.
I don't think I could survive 40 days in my *own house*,
with a stocked refrigerator and air-conditioning—
if I was all alone,
if I could not leave it, or have anyone join me in it.

But Jesus was out there alone in the wilderness for *40 days*,
sent there by the Holy Spirit,
met there by the devil.

As painful and full of suffering as it was,
it must have also been deeply clarifying for Jesus.

At his baptism he was named by his Father.
“You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”
In the desert, that identity was tested.
The Deceiver was intent on
convincing Jesus to walk away from his true self,
away from that voice from heaven that named him.
The desert deceiver failed in that attempt.
And eventually gave up and left for another opportune time.

That's what Jesus' temptations were all about.
He was tempted to let go of his true self,
and grasp hold of a false identity.

When he was
tempted to use his power to turn stones into bread
and satisfy his intense hunger,
tempted with political power and influence,
tempted to attract attention and glory to himself,
the real underlying temptation—in all three of those—
was to hold on and let go of the wrong things.
To let go of his true identity,
to release himself from his heavenly call,
to forget who he belonged to,
and to grasp hold of the intoxicating power
of controlling his *own* destiny,
satisfying his *own* desires,
and using power over others to accomplish his agenda.

We who are called by Christ,
are in *exactly that position*.
We, *too*, are given a name by God.
God calls us his own children,
adopts us,
calls us into a new community.

And we are constantly tempted, like Jesus,
to let go of, and hold on to, the wrong things—
to let go of that which is true to who God created us to be,
and hold on to those things that distract and derail.

Lent is the season to refocus, rethink, repent,
to reorient ourselves God-ward.
It is the season for holding on
to those things which move us toward God,
and God's kingdom.
And it is the season for letting go
of *whatever* may be in our lives,
that functions as a distraction.

Like I said,
it will require some careful discernment
to determine what you called to hold on to,
and let go of during this season of Lent.
We take Lent too lightly,
if we think we can just decide on a dime,
the day before Ash Wednesday,
what one substance or behavior
to fast from for 40 days . . .
and then assume that *we've done the work of Lent*.

No, Lent is a season for discerning.
It will take all 40 days, and maybe *then some*,
to listen for what God is telling us to hold on to,
and to let go of.
It *will* be more than one simple material thing.
I am confident of that.

Each Sunday that we gather in worship this season,
we will allow time in the service to at least *start* this work
of holding on . . . and letting go.
It will come in our weekly ritual of confession,
following the sermon.
It will be an act in which you get physically involved
in the holding and releasing.
And it will be, at the same time, both completely private,
and very public.

We will not be required . . . this morning, or ever . . .
to reveal to anyone else what we feel called to let go of.

It may be something clearly sinful we are confessing,
greed or anger that's gone awry and hurt other people,
some act of violence, or infidelity, or deceit,
or some sexual addiction, or food addiction, or substance abuse.
It may be something that seems rather benign,
television habits, or use of the internet,
the way we eat, the way we treat our bodies.
It may be some toxic relationship that needs to be addressed,
some bitterness eating away at our spirit.
It may be a general self-absorption that's getting us off-track.

I will shortly invite those who wish to participate
to a period of silent reflection and physical action.
After a short time of meditation,
we will physically express our holding on to Christ
by moving from our seats and approaching the cross.
And we will physically let go of something
God may be prompting us to let go of,
by literally casting it on the water,
letting it float away in God's healing stream.

On the stand here near the cross is a vessel of clear water.
In the hymnal racks in front of you are the usual blue folders,
but inside you will find tiny slips of tissue paper.
If you want to participate,
take your pen or pencil (or borrow from someone nearby)
and write on one of those slips of paper
what God is prompting you to release.
And when you are ready,
approach the cross and release that slip of paper onto the water.
This is a very public demonstration of your will
to hold on to Christ and let go of what's getting in the way.
But *what* you release into the water will not be seen by anyone.
What doesn't dissolve,
will be taken out in one soggy clump and disposed of.
But after today,
this act of letting go will be strengthened
if you share it with someone,
and allow the body of which we are part,

to help us on this continuing journey
of holding on, and letting go.

After I lead in a prayer of confession,
there will be time to silently pray and write,
and then we will begin to sing from
Sing the Story #63 . . . God, fill me now.
Anytime during the music and singing,
just come and participate in this ritual as you wish.

Let us pray.
With all our heart and mind and strength, Lord,
we hold on to you,
to that which gives us life.
But we confess that we have also stubbornly held on
to things that distract us from the life you intend.
Give us the wisdom, and the strength,
to let go, to empty our hands before you.
And the confidence that in so doing,
you will fill us now . . . with you.

—*Phil Kniss, February 21, 2010*