

“Ashes and Hope”

A Reflection by Pastor Beth on Lent 2 Lectionary texts:

Genesis 17: 1-7, 15-16; Psalm 22: 23-31; Romans 4:13-25; Mark 8: 31-38

Lent Series - Wilderness Calls to Deep Faith

Two weeks ago on Valentine’s Day our family was enjoying a glorious afternoon skating on our creek. We had just picked up our oldest daughter Selah from Conrad Grebel College for reading week and I was looking forward to a week of vacation rest and play. While gliding in the wintry sunshine I took an unfortunate tumble fracturing my ankle in three places and spraining my knee. Not the vacation ‘break’ I was hoping for! I am currently in a cast, laid up significantly, and dependent on my loving family to help me during this wilderness time. On Ash Wednesday I was struck by how “Ashy” it all felt. Pain, discomfort, disappointment, and dependency on others all reminders of my human frailty and finitude. Lent invites us to remember this, “From dust you came and from dust you shall return”.

Our culture prefers not to remember this truth with it’s death denying messages that we can live forever, and look and feel great doing it, if only we take the right vitamins, apply the best creams, and join the next transformational self-help program. The wilderness of Lent calls us to face the reality of the ashes. We are mortal. If this pandemic year has taught us anything it is this. We are not in control, we are fragile, human, and dependent on one another. And yet in the midst of these ashes, there is also hope.

Sitting with the lectionary readings for this Sunday, I was drawn to the thread of hope that weaves throughout them. “*I will bless her, and she shall give rise to nations*”, God says of Sarai in Genesis 17. “*The poor shall eat and be satisfied*”, the psalmist sings in Psalm 22. “*Hoping against hope, he believed*”, Paul writes of Abraham in Romans 4.

In the gospel reading from Mark, the message of hope is couched in grim words. *“Then [Jesus] began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed”*, Mark writes. And then he closes the sentence with these words: *“and after three days rise again”*. Peter, it seems, is understandably overwhelmed by the first part of Jesus’ teaching here and fails to grasp the essence of this last part. *Suffering, rejection, death*, he hears. Peter cannot abide this and he takes Jesus aside hoping to persuade him of a different path. We know how Jesus responds to Peter; we hear the harshness of his rebuke and the difficulty of the message he goes on to proclaim to the disciples and the surrounding crowd. Jesus tells them, *“If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life,”* he says, *“will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.”* Jesus is concerned not only that Peter and his companions let him go but also that they learn to release their hold on their own lives. Jesus calls his followers to relinquish self and the illusions of security, control, and immortality. Jesus calls his followers to a deep faith in the God who is the source of hope.

At the heart of Jesus’ rebuke to Peter and the heart of the hard, hard lesson that follows, there is a message about what it means to hope against hope - to hope when there seems no cause for hope, to hope in the face of despair. Jesus’ teaching and life calls us to hope against hope in a God who promises solidarity and steadfast love in the midst of our humanity. We are called to hope against hope that God creates new life in barren places. We are called to hope against hope that we will be raised to life by the power of the resurrection. And as we align and ally with this God who is the source of hope, we find ourselves called to action in a way that remembers we are dust AND remembers we are God’s GOOD creation. As we relinquish our illusions of grandeur, we can embrace our inheritance in Christ as God’s beloved children who are invited to join in the hope-expanding and healing work of the Spirit within and around us.

Reverend Alan Jones writes about how facing our limitations, frailty and mortality can bring loving force, clarity and focus to life. Facing the reality of our human condition can provide relief from the desperate facade of pretending that we're infallible, that we have it all together, and that we don't need one another. This kind of thinking only leads to depression and despair. Despair is ultimately tied to our illusions of control and immortality, *"despair is to be given up and seen as the ego-grasping device that it really is. Despair about ourselves and the world is perhaps, the ego's last and therefore, greatest attachment."*

In this season of Lent we are often encouraged to "give up" our attachments to things in order to make more room in our lives for our relationship with God. Many do this by fasting from treats, indulgences and addictions. I've been thinking of Jones' words about despair and I am feeling called to "a different kind of fast" this year, one inspired by the writing of my mentor and teacher Christine Valters Paintner. This Lent I will not be giving up chocolate, caffeine or netflix. This Lent I will be fasting from "ego-grasping". I will practice noticing when I desperately want to be in control and yielding to a wisdom that is greater than my own.

This Lent I will be fasting from feeling like I always need to be strong and hold it together. I will embrace the profound grace that comes through vulnerability and tenderness.

This Lent I will be fasting from stubborn self-reliance and will allow others to help me. I will learn to receive.

This Lent I will be fasting from anxiety and the endless mind traffic that distracts and drives me to fear. I will practice radical trust in the Divine heart of compassion and abundance.

This Lent I will be fasting from despair and will hope against hope in the One who is making all things new.

This Lent I will be keeping fresh tulips in the house to energize me with the hope that Spring will surely emerge from Winter's fallow landscape, that God creates new life in barren places, and that we will be raised up by the power of the resurrection.

Is there a different kind of fast that you are called to this Lent? How will you practice noticing when you long to be in control and yielding to a greater wisdom?

What or who makes you feel hopeful? What practices help you deepen your capacity for hope and for living out this hope in the world?

Take some time to sit prayerfully with these reflection questions and perhaps write down or journal your responses.

As I finish writing this devotional, I'm propped up in bed with my computer, I just took some pain meds and my leg is elevated. It's far from glamorous and continues to remind me that I'm broken, finite and mortal...we all are. But we're in this together! (Pastor Doug and Annie just delivered borscht, buns and dessert...thank goodness I didn't give up sweets for Lent) AND we are God's beautiful, beloved children, held in the everlasting embrace of the One who promises companionship and steadfast love in the midst of our very human journey. That gives me hope!

May the wilderness calls to deep faith not be a burden this Lent. May they be a relief. In this culture saturated with false images of self-improvement and immortality may it be refreshing to admit that we are God's good creations - perfectly imperfect and impermanent. May this Lenten journey inspire us to give ourselves more fully to one another and more deeply in faith to God whose wisdom and ways are greater than our own.

May the Hope that calls us into life and holds us beyond death bless you and keep you and go with you into this new week!