

Lent is for the Weak—Genesis 9: 8-17
(February 18, 2018-First Sunday in Lent)

I find whenever people get sentimental about the church they usually take you back to the 1950's, a time when there was no problem getting volunteers, the finances were healthy and there were 500 children in the Sunday school, or some such number. I get sentimental about the 50's as well—but its the 50's of the first century.

The book of Acts¹ tells us in that in that first church property and possessions were pooled so that widows and orphans could be looked after. Resources were spent on helping people. No money was spent on buildings. The church was based in the home, that's where people met for worship. I think that's pretty good stewardship. Christians had no political power either, in fact they were often persecuted for their faith. To be a Christian was to be on the margins of society.

For the first two hundred years or so Christianity was a religion for the weak. That all changed when the Roman emperor Constantine converted and decreed Christianity the official religion of the Roman Empire. Christianity became the religion of the strong. The base for the church moved out of the home and into Roman temples which were converted into what we now recognize as churches. Women were removed from leadership positions, to be replaced by men in a hierarchy of authority: priests, bishops, cardinals and pope. Christianity not only had the ear of those in power, it had its hands on the levers of power.

I bring all this up because as I was thinking about the beginning of Lent this week and I wanted to trace back the origins of a phenomenon that I have seen happen all too often in churches. It's the phenomenon that says church is a place for the strong, a place for those who've got their life together, a place for those who've got this God thing figured out. I make this observation because quite often I have seen it happen where someone is a regular church attender and then something happens to them or someone they love—a death, a divorce, a mental illness, an addiction and they stop attending church. Somehow in the midst of vulnerability, weakness and pain some of us don't see the church as a place where we can be ourselves, we don't see the church as a safe place to be weak, to be vulnerable.

I want to be clear, this is not a failing of the individual, nobody should be judged for seeking to protect themselves when they are in pain. It's a failing of the church. Somehow the message has become, consciously or subconsciously, that church is for the strong, for those who've got it all together, spiritually, emotionally and theologically. We need to change that.

Lent, like Christianity itself isn't for the strong, Lent is for the weak. Lent is for those who hunger for meaning in their lives, who thirst for a closer relationship with God, for those

¹ Acts 2: 44-47

who see in their lives a deep need. An uncomfortable truth for many of us is that the more successful and powerful we perceive ourselves to be, the less reliant we become on faith, on God. The Russian novelist and human rights activist Alexandr Solzhenitsyn said that he learned to pray in a Siberian concentration camp because he had no other hope. Before his arrest, when things were going well, he seldom gave God a thought. When we are weak and aware of our weakness the life of faith takes on a greater sense of urgency; surrender to God comes out of necessity, the good that comes to us is viewed as grace—gift and blessing. This paradox of the Christian faith is something Paul talks about: when we are strong, we are weak, when we are weak we are strong.² The strong person is full of themselves, there is no room for God. The weak person is empty, there is room, there is space for the Spirit to emerge and flow through their life. In the words attributed to Jesus, those who want to save their life will lose it and those who lose their life for God's sake will gain it.³

So the questions we ask ourselves at Lent are important. What if we asked this question; “what in me needs to die to make room for God in my life? That’s a different kind of question isn’t it—Its about creating space in our lives for God and letting God do the work. Its about embracing weakness and vulnerability as the doorway to God. Its about busting the myth of self-reliance and independence and embracing the truth of our interconnectedness and total dependence on God. Lent is for the weak.

When I read the scripture this week I was struck by verse 11, especially the words, “*never again*”; “*I establish my covenant with you, that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of a flood.*” “*Never again*”; Is the writer of this legend telling us that God feels remorse, that God learned from this experience and was now making a change? In fact, there is an entire branch of theology called process theology that claims that God does indeed change, that God learns from experience. The new covenant after the flood seems to signal a change in how God operates: “*never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of a flood.*” It’s the realization that a loving relationship with humanity can’t be built by force and manipulation. God’s power rests not on the coercive force of a flood but on the promise of the rainbow, of a God who will forevermore be guided by mercy, of a God who becomes vulnerable for our sake. Lent isn’t for the strong, Lent is for the weak.

Isn’t that the living Word that comes to us from Good Friday and Easter? Lent is the journey to the cross, a journey to death, with faith as our only companion, faith that God will not abandon us there but will bring new life if we humble ourselves, if we make room for the Spirit. “*What in me needs to die so that I can make room for God in my life?*”

Lent invites us to become intimately involved in the holy mysteries of crucifixion and resurrection, to embrace weakness and vulnerability in faith, to see ourselves as the seed

² 2 Corinthians 12: 9.

³ Luke 9: 24

that falls to the ground and dies so that new life can emerge. During Lent we are invited to live what Jesus lived—to strip away everything but the essential; our relationship with God—and to discover there a rainbow, a promise fulfilled, an empty tomb, resurrection. The grace of Lent is the assurance that “despair and disillusionment are not dead ends but signs of impending resurrection.”⁴ Maybe we should get a bit sentimental for the old church, not the one imposed on us by a Roman emperor, but the one entrusted to us by a Jewish peasant. Amen.

⁴ Parker Palmer, *The Promise of Paradox: A Celebration of Contradictions in the Christian Life*, Jossey-Bass, 2008, p. 33.