

The First Sunday in Lent
March 10, 2019
The Rev. Jedediah D. Holdorph
Trinity Episcopal Church, Bend

Deuteronomy 26:1-11
Psalm 91:1-2, 9-16
Romans 10:8b-13
Luke 4:1-13

“Once more, the Church invites us into the observance of a holy Lent.”

That was my theme in the March issue of our parish newsletter and my Ash Wednesday sermon, as well.

I wonder, what would make it a “holy Lent” for you and for me?

I know that, for some folks, words and acts of contrition – and the promise of absolution that follows – are cleansing and renewing. But for others, Lent can feel like we’re sinking into a litany of failings and shortcomings.

Whatever works for you, my hope is that you open up the “good news” of God’s love this Lent.

Earlier this week, my wife, Barb, posted a blog that is full of such good news. She called it “A letter from God to her daughters who observe Lent.” This is how it begins:

Dear Daughter,

On Ash Wednesday, if you’re in church, the minister will invite you to the observance of a “holy Lent” and mark your forehead with the ashes of repentance.

Let me be very clear about this at the outset: I love you so much. I delight in you. I cherish you. For ever.

And the letter is full of the good news of God’s love from that point on ... good news, apparently, that many people were thirsting for. This post received an unprecedented response – more than 30,000 people saw it. We’ve lost track on how many shared it. The vast majority of responses have said they’ve been deeply touched and profoundly moved and greatly appreciative.

A few asked about a letter from God to God’s sons. That wasn’t this letter’s concern, but a message for God’s daughters is likely still helpful for many of her sons as well. It ends this way:

This Ash Wednesday, let those ashes symbolize our unending connection ... When the priest wipes those gritty ashes on your forehead and says, “Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return,” celebrate your elemental oneness with this dear, dirty earth and with me. I am in those ashes, in the dust, in the stars, and in you.

Girl, I need you! You're the only you I created. So, please, let yourself be the creation I made you to be. You don't need someone outside yourself telling you how to live. Trust yourself. Trust your heart. Trust me. I've got you.

All my Love,
Godⁱ

Those final words, explicitly addressed to God's daughters, sound – at least to me – an awful lot like words once proclaimed to God's son, Jesus. Luke tells us that after his baptism, before Jesus was led into the wilderness, “the Holy Spirit descended upon him ... And a voice came from heaven, ‘You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased’” (Luke 3:22).

So maybe, as the Spirit led Jesus into the wilderness ... maybe the Spirit whispered in his ear:

... please, let yourself be the creation I made you to be. You don't need someone outside yourself telling you how to live. Trust yourself. Trust your heart. Trust me. I've got you.

All my Love,
God

Trusting himself. Trusting his heart. Trusting what “the voice of the ripped heavens” said to him about his God-given identity. I think that's exactly what got Jesus through those temptations. Each one tries to erode Jesus' confidence that he is enough, that he is secure, that he is worthy of God's love. But Jesus never takes the bait. He remembers who he is and to whom he belongs.

Of course, we're not Jesus. None of us is tempted, I presume, to believe that we could command stones to become loaves of bread or that we could take control of all the kingdoms of the world or that we could act recklessly and guardian angels would step in and save us from our foolishness.

But for all that, there is something familiar about Jesus' temptations all the same.

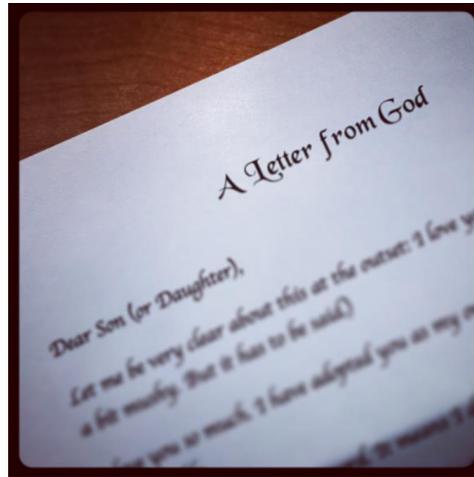
This is how the writer Parker Palmer once put it:

Though few of us get needled for thinking we are the Chosen, the tone of the taunt should remind us of outward or inward voices in our lives: “If you are so able ...,” “If you are a real woman or man ...,” “If you truly care ...,” “If you are such a good parent ...” The root temptation is almost irresistible. It is not the temptation to do a magic trick, which most of us know we cannot. It is the temptation to prove our identity, which many of us feel we must.ⁱⁱ

Proving ourselves. That's an equal opportunity affliction, tempting men and women alike.

And yet there is something in Jesus' temptations that may especially afflict men. I ponder those three temptations only briefly – make bread, be powerful, compel God's angels for protection – and I hear echoes of old tapes of cultural expectations that tell men, in particular, that their value is measured by their ability to be the family bread-winner, that real men are powerful and authoritative, and that a man should never admit to being anything but invincible.

So maybe "A letter from God to her daughters who observe Lent" deserves a letter from God to God's sons ... which I just happen to have.¹



Dear Son (or Daughter),

Let me be very clear about this at the outset: I love you so much. (I know that's a bit mushy. But it has to be said.)

I love you so much. I have adopted you as my own. And the bond between us is indissoluble.

Indissoluble. I love that word. It means I delight in you. I cherish you. For ever.

I remember the day you were born. You've held a newborn baby. Think about that astonishing moment ... to hold something so wonderful and so terrifyingly fragile. That's how I feel about you. Always have. Always will.

And don't get me started on puppies. They're so adorable. And so are you!

So here's the thing ... you don't have to earn your way into my good favor. You don't have to prove anything to me ... or to anyone. Not even yourself. You are my beloved.

You don't hear that enough, I know. You are assaulted by advertising at every turn – voices always stirring up in you a sense of deficiency and inadequacy. As if a new car or a new head of hair or a new energy drink or a good portfolio could fix what ails you.

¹ I suspect "A letter from God to her daughters" has meaning for God's sons. So, too, I share this "letter" with the belief that there's good news here for all God's children.

But I promise you, you don't need to look better to look good enough. You don't have to be stronger to be strong enough. I hope you don't think me vain, but I made you in my image ... and that's good enough in my book.

Your politics play on your fears, as if the world cleaves neatly between "us" and "them." But here's the thing: every person you'll ever meet in this world is another one of my children ... just one of your siblings you haven't met yet.

Your politicians run for office, telling you they can protect you from all that threatens you and those you love. But they can't.

The world is imperfect. Violence erupts all over. Accidents happen all the time. People get sick – and die – every day. Nobody can protect you from all that.

I know you don't like it. Sorry, but that's just the way it is.

The trick is not to spend all your time and energy keeping yourself safe and warm. The trick is to help each other whenever things go wrong.

And know this: I am with you. Always.

That's one of the reasons I sent Jesus to live among you. I want you to notice the life he lived. He suffered the same trials and tribulations as you. He was rejected and abused in the worst ways a man could be treated, yet he never retaliated in kind.

And after you did your worst, I raised Jesus from the dead to demonstrate to you that my love is more powerful than all the hate in the world, that life is more powerful than death.

You know, there is one thing you could do for me. You could turn to your neighbor from time to time and tell them what I'm telling you. Say to them, "God loves you."

This season of Lent, I hope you'll find some time to remember these things.

And know that I need you. You're the only you I created. So, please, let yourself be the creation I made you to be. You don't need someone outside yourself telling you how to live. Trust yourself. Trust your heart. Trust me. I've got you.

All my love,
God

That's some "good news" for us in this morning's gospel, "good news" for us to live into this Lent. Jesus did not have to do anything to prove his identity or his worth. And neither do we. Jesus shows us how. God has already claimed us and named us ... and in precisely the same way God claimed and named Jesus. We are God's children now. That is who we are. We are God's beloved. We need do nothing more ... nothing more save accept what has been given.

ⁱ Barb Morris @ <http://www.barbmorris.com/a-letter-from-god-to-her-daughters-who-observe-lent/>.

ⁱⁱ Parker Palmer, "Jesus in the Desert," in *The Active Life: A Spirituality of Work, Creativity, and Caring* (1990), p. 105.