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1 Lent, Year B
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A Shame-Freeing Lent

Genesis 9:8-17

God said to Noah and to his sons with him, "As for me, I am establishing my covenant with you and your descendants after you, and with every living creature that is with you, the birds, the domestic animals, and every animal of the earth with you, as many as came out of the ark. I establish my covenant with you, that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of a flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth." God said, "This is the sign of the covenant that I make between me and you and every living creature that is with you, for all future generations: I have set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth. When I bring clouds over the earth and the bow is seen in the clouds, I will remember my covenant that is between me and you and every living creature of all flesh; and the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all flesh. When the bow is in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that is on the earth." God said to Noah, "This is the sign of the covenant that I have established between me and all flesh that is on the earth."

Mark 1:9-15

In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him. Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news."

I don't know if you noticed the now common practice in many stores that to get the checkout counter, you have to weave your way through multiple aisles stocked with layers of impulse buying temptations. We are talking about many things most of us probably do not need – sweets, tiny flashlights, key rings and note cards. While we wait and navigate the line, and in a weaker moment, it's pretty easy to convince ourselves to put one or two things into the cart. The strategy works. These zones have a name in the trade: "impulse areas."

There is a place where Lent always begins.

The season always begins with stories of Jesus in the wilderness. 40 days in the wilderness: 40 days of Lent. Jesus was tempted by Satan. Our temptations, large and small,

may not be as clear or dramatic, but find us in different ways. We make our way, counting the days, until we can celebrate again the mystery and hope of the Resurrection at Easter.

Lent is not for the faint of heart that is clear. It's as if we roll out the heaviest churchiest words on our church inventory. Penitence. Contrition. Repentance. Sin.

On Ash Wednesday this past week we began with a cascade of words and images.

We lamented our sins and acknowledged our wretchedness, praying that a merciful God grant us perfect remission and forgiveness.

The psalm we prayed was not the pastoral Good Shepherd 23rd Psalm – to go-to song of comfort full of green pastures and still waters. We went with Psalm 51 for a cold plunge and a good scrubbing of our souls:

O God, in your great compassion blot out my offenses. Wash me through and through from my wickedness and cleanse me from my sin. My sin is ever before me. Purge me from my sin, and I shall be pure; wash me, and I shall be clean indeed. Rinse and repeat.

I'm all for Ash Wednesday. Ready or not, to begin the journey to Easter one has to begin somewhere.

I allow those ancient words to flow over me believing that I need to hear them again.

After receiving and smudging ashes on the assembled foreheads, I began to lead the Litany of Penitence.

I found myself mindful of the volume and the intensity of the language. Good luck, I thought, to a person walking into a church for the first time hearing these words.

“Most holy and merciful Father:
We confess to you and to one another,
and to the whole communion of saints
in heaven and on earth.”

Stop. This is not our normal Sunday general confession where we are speaking to God alone. Everyone now knows our business – the whole communion of saints, dead and alive – they get to eavesdrop in on our listing how we have fallen short.

The list is long:

We have not loved you with our whole heart, and mind, and strength. We have not loved our neighbors as ourselves. We have not forgiven others, as we have been forgiven.

We have been deaf to your call to serve.

We confess unfaithfulness, pride, hypocrisy, and impatience.

Our self-indulgent appetites and ways, and our exploitation of other people.

As I prayed, I entered into a quiet back and forth with myself.

I thought: is all of this really necessary? Listing all of the ways I have failed and fallen short. Is this even good for me? Will God ever be satisfied with our limitations and humanness without us having to beg for forgiveness. Isn't that all so two or three millennia ago?

I checked myself and kept going through the Litany.

Our envy of those more fortunate than ourselves. OK. I can see where I hits home.

Our intemperate love of worldly goods and comforts. I do like my hot showers in the morning and my whole bean specially roasted morning coffee.

Our negligence in prayer and worship. The worship part is pretty much covered doing what I do, but a prayer life always needs tending to.

Our blindness to human need and suffering, and our indifference to injustice and cruelty.

For all false judgments, for uncharitable thoughts toward our neighbors, and for our prejudice and contempt toward those who differ from us. OK. If I were honest...

Just when I was ready again to dismiss the whole exercise as out of date, I realize there could be some wisdom there. Some timely spiritual work to be done.

Restore us, good Lord, we pray: and let your anger depart from us.

One of the first Bible stories children learn about is Noah's ark. What's not to like? It has all the makings of a good story. Building a giant boat, animals two by two, and a rainbow appears at the end. Yet the darker side of this story that we don't read to children before they go to bed is how angry God was before the arc got built. Because of the evil, wickedness, and corruption of humanity, the Lord (Genesis 6:6) regretted that he had made human beings on the earth.

So, we work our way through that part of the story to arrive at where we read today how a new covenant is established between God and humanity. Never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth. We might add in today's every changing climate: at least not one God caused. A rainbow in the sky was the sign of this new covenant.

Lent allows us a space and a time to begin in one place in order to end up somewhere else. The 40 days of wilderness ended.

We need to be reminded to hold the language of sin and penitence in fair balance with the whole of faith story. As the Prayer Book puts it, God does not desire the death of sinners but rather they turn and live. Never again.

I recently came across a resource that called for what they refer to as a “Shame-freeing Lent.” It starts out by citing the expert on shame, writer, and TED talk phenom Brene Brown, who defines shame as “the intensely painful feeling or experience of believing that we are flawed and therefore unworthy of love, belonging, and connection.” It is an emotion that is part of being human, but one that can compel us to turn against ourselves or our neighbors.

The Shame-freeing Lent resources cautions us to be careful as hearers and users of the language we have inherited.

They remind us that there is no place to believe that when God looks at us, all God sees is our sin and wretchedness. That God feels anger and displeasure towards us – that in order for God to see me, I must feel ashamed.

This is a distortion and there is a way to move beyond this thinking.

We get there by remembering that in the Resurrection, God unravels the shame of the cross and opens up new life.

We get there by remembering that being a part of the body of Christ, there is strength and purpose and meaning in community. At our best, we can make room for all, wherever they are on their spiritual journey.

And the end of every storm there comes a calm and a reset. At the end of every day and the being of the next, there is an opportunity to forgive and be forgiven.

That tough psalm 51 that was prayed on Ash Wednesday also gives us words of comfort and a way forward.

Make me hear of joy and gladness, that the body you have broken may rejoice.

Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me.

Give me the joy of your saving help again *
and sustain me with your bountiful Spirit.

Open my lips, O Lord, and my mouth shall proclaim your praise.