



The Direction You're Walking

Homily by Lisa Wiens Heinsobn given on the First Sunday in Lent, February 18, 2018

Mark 1:9-15

So we are in lent. Lent is forty days of fasting and introspection and repentance. The reason followers of Jesus observe lent, which we've done since about the 3rd century, is because Jesus himself went into the wilderness to fast and to be tempted by Satan. When that is over he begins his public ministry—saying, “The time is fulfilled, the kingdom of God has come near: Repent and believe the good news.” So the first week of lent always includes the story about Jesus' forty days of temptation in the wilderness, and with a call to repentance. This is why we started our liturgy today with the Great Litany, where we confess to God a long list of things we've done or left undone that miss the mark, and seek forgiveness and renewal of life.

But I'll tell you, even though I'm a priest, it can be hard for me to move through that long list of wrongs we've individually and collectively committed. It's not that I necessarily disagree with it, by the way – I know we've done wrong and failed to do the right thing many times. I think the Great Litany is hard because I know that no matter how hard I try, I'm still going to make mistakes, I'm never going to achieve perfect compliance with this list – and then it's easy to just feel hopeless, or judged and shamed. When my brother Steve and I were teenagers, when my Mom would try to get us to do whatever it was that we should have been doing, we'd often accuse her of giving us a guilt trip. And she'd just say: “If the guilt fits, wear it.” That never made me want to change even when she was right, it just made me want to get away from my mother. And I think without understanding the context in which lent falls, it's easy to just feel judged and shamed by church,

and to want to get away from it – whether we get away by just not coming, or whether we just internally check out during liturgies like this.

But at the same time, we all know there is much in the world, in our personal lives and in the broader society in which we live, which urgently needs restoration. As Tom preached last week, we are being asked to accept the mantle of Jesus—to truly follow his way, to accept the ministry of love and reconciliation, and to embody good news to a world that sorely needs it.

Some of you might know that the word repent in Greek just means to turn. It has to do with the destination toward which you are walking. No matter how far you walk, how many miles you put in every day, if you are not pointed in the right direction, you will never get where you want to go—and so repenting just means to turn to face the right direction. That is why the word for sin in the original language means missing the mark. Whether we are one degree off or 180 degrees off, whether we sin a little or a lot, our very best efforts will not help us if our priorities are off.

You'll notice that Jesus does not say, repent and try harder. Repent and feel ashamed. Repent and be perfect. This is in fact what he says: The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God, the realm of God, has come near. Repent and believe the good news.

The good news we need to trust is what Jesus says first, that the time is fulfilled; the time is right now. The realm of God has come very near to you. Let's pause there for a minute. Where IS God's realm? Does it seem near to you? Seventeen people, mostly youths, were killed this week at a high school in Florida. The nation is grieving and also in an uproar about what to do about it. Where is God?

The realm of God is what was made actual in Jesus of Nazareth, Jesus the Christ. It is the reality that no matter how hard we deny it, God has made us for connection and a radical love for all, a love that gives each one of us an identity as a child of God. Even if we can't see it, we are all already connected, bound

together in the life of God who sees us exactly as we are and who loves us without conditions. Who is a child of God? You and I, and the President of the NRA, and each youth killed in Florida, and my mother who gave me guilt trips, and Nicholas Cruz, and the saints we are studying in Lent Madness, and the relatives you most love and the relatives that drive you crazy, and the innocent and the guilty.

When Jesus says that the “kingdom of God is near,” I believe he means that we have only to step into it. We have only to recognize that no matter what our usual identities are, we have a deeper identity as Beloved of God—and it’s this reality that gives us the power to repent and not try harder or feel ashamed or be perfect, but believe. Believe the good news. Trust that God is alive and the kingdom of God is real and that we can follow it, we CAN accept Jesus’ mantle and follow his way, even though we know very well how often we do miss the mark, and even though we know it’s risky to love instead of judge or accuse or fear. In fact it’s the paradox of realizing that we are loved and connected even when we fail that gives us the humility to love others when they fail, including those we most disagree with or those most different from us.

God is right here to each of us personally. Now is always the time. Because that is true, we can each surrender to the power and love of God, and then shift our priorities. We can then be willing to live into our truest identities as beloved children of God, and trust that others are also beloved children of God worthy of dignity and respect.

Our temptation is always to fail to perceive the kingdom of God. Jesus went to the wilderness to be tempted by Satan. Do you know what the word Satan means? It means the accuser. We will always be tempted to see things through the false lens of accusation and judgment and blame. Why is it that our country can’t come to agreement about how to address school shootings? I don’t think it’s because we have different opinions about whether or how to regulate gun ownership or pay better attention to mental illness. I think it’s because we have ceased to believe or recognize that the people who disagree with us are beloved children of God, none of whom wants children to be gunned down at school. We have the spirit of

accusation, which just entrenches each side in battle mode instead of facilitating cooperation and humility and compromise. We even hear the great litany in terms of accusation instead of a helpful invitation to see how and where we need to turn.

I recently spoke with an alcoholic in recovery who was telling me about the twelve steps. AA sums up the first three steps in the following language: “I can’t. God can. I’ll let that happen.” Only after thoroughly working through each of these steps and coming to trust that a higher power can help, does an alcoholic begin to survey his or her life to make what they call a “moral inventory” of themselves—to repent, using Christian language. Lent relies on the same beginning. We are grounded in the truth of Christmas and the Epiphany, that God has come to us in human form to show us how beloved we are and show us the way to live. Only then can we have courage to face our failures and become willing to surrender to the reality that we are Beloved in spite of our failures, which causes us to trust God and live from that place. The realm of God is not a place of accusation and blame and fear, and all the destructive effects these things bring about, but a place of seeing the reality of our connection with each other because we are loved by God. This can help us to speak the truth in love – to invite each other to do the right thing, not because we need to do so to be worthy, but because we are already worthy and God calls us to the ministry of reconciliation and wholeness and courage. As Bishop Marianne Budde says, “Jesus’ message in life [is about] the radical unrelenting love of God, all inclusive and all demanding. . .that does require us to turn, and to open up and show up.”¹

May you see the direction in which you are currently walking. Where does it lead? Let us turn, together, toward the realm of God. Let us trust that the love of God is real and binds us all together forever. Let us work for reconciliation and wholeness. Amen.

¹ See January 21, 2018: Sunday Forum w/ guest Dr. Brené Brown at Washington National Cathedral, published on January 21, 2018, accessed at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vzwcNDi4Wo&sns=fb> on February 18, 2018.