

Preaching the Lenten Lectionary

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Sometimes I wonder if while we weren't looking, the church turned into Vegas. Like the commercial says, too often what happens in church stays in church. What we may need most in Lent is the blessing and the challenge to live our faith once we leave worship.

First Sunday of Lent: Genesis 9:8-17; Psalm 25:1-10; 1 Peter 3:18-22; Mark 1:9-15

Jesus was baptized and the Spirit descended upon him "like a dove." We may be tempted to sing, "There's a sweet, sweet Spirit in this place," but Jesus is not likely to sing with us. This Spirit "drove him out into the wilderness." The Greek word translated "drove out" is *ekballo*. It is more frequently translated "cast out" and is the verb that describes Jesus' actions against demons: he casts them out.

The wilderness into which Jesus is cast is not a particular zip code; it is a spiritual condition. Mark intends us to remember the other wilderness stories. The wilderness is a testing place. With Pharaoh in the rear view mirror, God's children danced and sang and praised God—for a little while. Then the realities of the wilderness sank in. Yes, it is true that they complained because they didn't like the menu (Numbers 11), but their first complaints were of a different nature: they had no food (Exodus 16). Then they had no water (Ex 17). Life was at risk! In the wilderness, they were dependent on God for life. Wilderness is not a particular place. The wilderness is anyplace where the teaching of Jesus seems foolish and other voices seem reasonable. Wilderness is anyplace where we must decide if God can be trusted with our lives.

In an odd detail, Mark tells us that in this wilderness *Jesus was with the wild beasts*. Some see the beasts as signs of the evil in the wilderness.¹ Others understand the wild beasts to illustrate the loneliness of Jesus in temptation.² But Mark does not say the wild beasts surrounded Jesus or came after Jesus, but that Jesus was *with* the wild beasts. Perhaps Mark has Isaiah in the back of his mind: "*The wolf shall live with the lamb, The leopard shall lie down with the kid*" (Is. 11:6-9).³

The wild beasts are signs of transformation. In this text we see a model of Jesus' entire ministry: he moves into the wilderness (Satan's domain) and brings glimpses of the kingdom. Spiritual discipline calls us to pay attention, to look for the signs of new life in the wilderness. There is no wilderness devoid of the wild beasts. Keep your eyes open.

Second Sunday of Lent: Genesis 17:1-7; Psalm 22:23-31; Romans 4:13-25; Mark 8:31-38

Things are sailing along quite nicely. For eight chapters Jesus has been casting out demons, healing the sick, walking on water, calming the storm, and feeding the masses. Jesus demonstrates that he has the power to do anything he wants to do. This is, seemingly, what Peter means when he says, "You are the Messiah." So, the disciples can hardly be blamed for being stunned when Jesus, for the first time, men-

tions the cross. *"The Son of Man must undergo great suffering."*

Suffering is one of the reasons many in our culture question the reality of God. Contemporary agnostics like Richard Dawkins⁴ or Bart Ehrman⁵ among others, point to innocent suffering as the reason belief in God is unreasonable, if not impossible.

Over against this "wisdom," Jesus makes some astonishing promises. As was true for John the Baptist, Jesus also must undergo great suffering. Not only this, but any who choose to follow Jesus will know suffering themselves. Following Jesus will not make our lives more comfortable.

Two things need to be said about this great suffering. First of all, the suffering of which Jesus speaks is chosen. Secondly, the suffering itself is never the point. Jesus does not choose to suffer, nor does he call his disciples to suffer. Suffering is the result, the consequence of faithful love. Frederick Buechner describes this kind of suffering love:

To love another, as you love a child, is to become vulnerable in a whole new way. It is no longer only through what happens to yourself that the world can hurt you, but through what happens to the one you love also and greatly more hurtingly. When it comes to your own hurt, there are always things you can do. You can put up a brave front, for one, and behind that front, if you are lucky, if you persist, you can become a little brave inside yourself. You can become strong in the broken places, as Hemingway said. You can become philosophical, recognizing how much of your troubles you have brought down on your own head and resolving to do better by yourself in the future.... But when it comes to the hurt of a child you love, you are all but helpless. The child makes terrible mistakes, and there is very little you can do to ease his pain, especially when you are so often a part of his pain, as the child is a part of yours. There is no way to make him strong with such strengths as you may have found through your own hurts, or wise enough through such wisdom, and even if there were, it would be the wrong way because it would be your way and not his. The child's pain becomes your pain, and as the innocent bystander, maybe it is even a worse pain for you, and in the long run even the bravest front is not much use.⁶

In Jesus Christ God became vulnerable to the whole world, loving all as God's own children. Those who follow Christ will also undergo such suffering. Such love will not make our lives more comfortable, but it will make us human.

Third Sunday of Lent: Exodus 20:1-17; Psalm 19; 1 Corinthians 1:18-25; John 2:13-22

"How are you doing?" "Fine, thanks. Busy, really busy." How many times have you heard that in the last week?

One of the moments of Jesus' ministry to be included in all four Gospels is the cleansing of the temple. The first task of the preacher may be to silence the synoptic voices for a moment. In the synoptic, Jesus cleanses the temple because it has become a "den of robbers." There is no reference to unjust business practices in John. They are just busy.

It was the Passover of the Jews. It was a holy time. Think Easter with the lilies and the trumpets. Think Maundy Thursday with the words whispered again, "My body broken for you." Passover was holy time. A few years ago as we gathered for our late Christmas Eve worship service, we sang, "O Come All Ye Faithful." While processing the Christ Candle into the sanctuary we read, "In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus...." While this was happening a gentleman near the front took out of his coat pocket two small jewelry boxes. He handed one to his wife and the other to his daughter. "For to you is born this day a savior...." Earrings and bracelets that had been worn to worship were swapped for these new gifts. Smiles were abundant. A discrete kiss on the cheek displayed gratitude. "Come let us see this thing the Lord has made known to us," the shepherds said. But neither the gentleman near the front nor his family had a chance to see the holy that night.

Jesus entered the temple, the holy place at the holy time, and everyone was busy buying and selling and changing money. It wasn't dishonest, just mundane. They were doing everything necessary to prepare for the perfect holiday, but they failed to see the presence of God right in front of them. They were captured by the business of life. Or better said, the busyness of life.

The synoptics speak of God's ultimate work of redemption (the Kingdom of God) in chronological terms: the fulfillment of the kingdom is ahead of us. But John speaks of God's glory as above us, if you will, all the time. It is always possible to push through the "thin places" and experience God's glory. Jesus cleanses the temple so that everything that distracts us from God's presence might be removed.

When our kids were young, we moved to a new city. Our neighborhood brought a new experience for the children: the Ice Cream Truck. You know the kind. They are run down, panel trucks with stickers plastered on them of ice cream cones and popsicles of every color. They announce their presence through some monotonous tune like "It's a Small World." The music rings out over the afternoon breezes and causes every child to stop whatever he or she is doing and run to Mom or Dad to plead for \$2.50 before the truck gets away.

When we first moved to town, my son heard the music and asked, "Dad, what is that?" I don't why I said what I said, really I don't. I don't think it was the daily \$2.50 or even the knowledge that supper would be ruined for the summer. "Nathan, that's a music truck, son." Technically this was true: the truck never comes without the music. "Why is that, Dad?" "Well, I guess he knows how much children like music." "Cool. This is a great neighborhood," Nathan said. For days the music truck passed through the neighborhood bringing joy to my children's ears. But one day the truck stopped right in front of our house, with a gaggle of kids purchasing snow cones and double dipper delight. Nathan spotted the activity, investigated, and returned to report. "Dad, you won't believe it. I've got great news. The music truck has ice cream." "Really?" I said. "Yeah, Dad, I think it's been there all along, and we missed it."

"So, how are you doing?" "Fine, busy though. Really busy." Lent is holy time. That barrier between the mundane and the glorious is so thin. The truth is it's that way all the time; it would be a shame to miss it.

Fourth Sunday of Lent: Numbers 21:4-9; Ps 107:1-3, 17-22; Ephesians 2:1-10; John 3:14-21

John 3 is a text about salvation. “*God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.*” Often when the preacher talks about “beliefs,” she has to do so in a way that ignores all the talk in this text about “deeds.” In the church of my childhood, I was taught very well that we are saved by grace, not by works. There is nothing we can do to contribute to our own salvation. We only need to believe in Jesus. But belief and deeds are joined at the hip in this text. *Those in the darkness do evil deeds; those in the light perform deeds done in God.*

What exactly does it mean to “believe”? The word *pisteuo* includes in its meaning not only “to be convinced of” but also “to trust.” There is a difference. What you are convinced of you “agree with.” It’s an intellectual thing. What you trust shows up not just in your thoughts, but in your living.

Several years ago, our family took a trip to the Grand Canyon. The views were breath-taking. But I was surprised by one thing. There are no guard rails at the Grand Canyon. You can walk right up to the edge, hang your toes over, and look hundreds of feet straight down, if you are so inclined. It turns out, I am not so inclined. I stepped back. It’s part of my belief system. I do not understand gravity, but I have full confidence in gravity. My trust in gravity shows up in how I live. That’s *pisteuo*.

Belief in Jesus Christ shows up in how we live. So, belief in Jesus, sooner or later, is a conversation about deeds. When the church talks about “belief,” we tend to think of doctrine. But here “belief” is not first a call to doctrine. It is first a call to hope. It is first a call to trust.

I read about J. Matthew Sleeth.⁷ He is a medical doctor who served as Chief of Staff at a New England hospital. About ten years ago he and his wife Nancy escaped the gray days of New England and sought a vacation in the sands of Florida. There sitting on the porch watching the evening surf, his wife Nancy asked him, “What is the greatest problem facing the world?” Do you have those kinds of conversations on vacation? What would you say? Poverty? War? After some thought, Sleeth said, “The earth is dying.” She asked, “Then what are we going to do about it?” Sleeth found in Jesus Christ a calling and a grace that empowered him to face environmental destruction with courage to do something about it. Because of his belief in Jesus, he has committed himself to a changed lifestyle and to inspire others to do the same. His belief in Jesus shows up in deeds.

A conversation about belief in Jesus, sooner or later, becomes a conversation not simply about what we think, but about what we do. So when the preacher comes to this text to preach about belief in Jesus, she will want to remind the gathered community that *those in the light perform deeds done in God.*

Fifth Sunday of Lent: Jeremiah 31:31-34; Psalm 51:1-12 or Ps 199:9-16; Hebrews 5:5-10; John 12:20-33

After insisting again and again, “The hour has not yet come,” some Greeks show up and change everything. Jesus announces, “The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified.” Jesus was sent into the world because God so loved *the world*. The problem with loving the world is you never get a chance to..., not really. It’s too big. It’s too burdensome. It is too confusing to know how to love it all. That’s why

Jesus waited for the Greeks.

We can tell Jesus is waiting for something. Something important will happen when “my hour” arrives, but not yet. He lives as a man with his eye focused over the fence. He’s always scanning the horizon. He’s checking his watch. The one who came to be the “light for all people” knew that most people were beyond the circle of the synagogue. The world was out there waiting to be loved and redeemed. But Jesus had to wait. Finally he hears that “some Greeks” wanted to see him. We don’t know who or how many there were. We can’t even be sure what it is they thought they wanted. Yet Jesus found their presence enough to change all the plans for the day. The “world” out there finally had a face. So Jesus scrambles to find the key to open the gate, to open the doors, to open the way for them to come in. That’s the way loving the world is. We never really love the world in the abstract. We have to love the world a face or two at a time.

I have heard the story of Lisa Martin’s High School graduation. It was a graduation like most. The graduates ascended the stairs to the stage, received their diplomas, and then descended the stairs on the other side of the stage. The gym was filled with people and cameras.

When Lisa graduated it was a high point in what had been a tragic year for her. After fighting it all year long, Lisa’s mother died of cancer three weeks before graduation. Lisa got her diploma, crossed the stage, and as she stood at the top of the steps, she searched the crowd. She made eye contact with her father. Over his head he held a picture of Lisa’s mother. She had to be there, or it just wasn’t graduation. Love turns the crowd into those who have faces and names. We love the world not in abstract, but by name.

Is it too much to think that Jesus walked through his ministry with one eye focused over the fence? That he constantly parted the curtains to scan the horizon? That he paced at the end of the driveway? Is it too much to think he came not simply because God so loved the world, but because God loves us by face and name? We know we can’t be who we are created to be without him. Is it too much to believe that he won’t be who he is sent to be without us?

Passion/Palm Sunday: Mark 11:1-11 or John 12:12-16, Psalm 118:1-2,19-29; Isaiah 50:4-9a; Psalm 31:9-16; Philipians 2:5-11; Mark 14:1-15:47 or Mark 15:1-39 (40-47)

Mrs. McIntyre inherited a run-down farm somewhere in the rural south. She has a few African American workers whom she calls by other designation. At least this is the way Flannery O’Connor describes it in her short story, “The Displaced Person.” The displaced person is Mr. Guizac, a war refugee from Poland. Mr. Guizac knows his way around a farm, can fix anything, grow anything, and he works like a machine. But he doesn’t know anything about southern racism. He crosses the line by treating blacks and whites as people. Even though Mr. Guizac is the best help she has ever had, Mrs. McIntyre determines she must get rid of him. She “has no other choice.” She knows he has nowhere else to go—he is a war refugee. “It is not my responsibility that Mr. Guizac has nowhere to go....I don’t find myself responsible for all the extra people in the world.”⁸ It’s a tragedy, she admits. But what can she do; she’s not responsible.

Palm Sunday begins with the “extra people” mostly. The ordinary people and

the broken people, the people no one claims any responsibility for. It is these who show up for the parade. This parade attracted anyone who would have reason to celebrate a new king. They danced and they sang. They lifted their babies in the air. They paved the way with palm branches. Fathers looked deep into their sons' eyes and said, "You remember this day. You are witnessing history. We are saved. We are free. Hosanna."

We have seen that kind of Palm Sunday freedom recently. The Arab Spring began in Egypt. "Extra people" gathered. Mubarak stepped down. The people paraded through the streets. They held their babies in the air. Mothers looked deep into the eyes of their daughters and said, "Remember this day. Today we are free."

I suppose there has never been a place on earth or a time in history when there has been more talk of freedom than in America. In America, freedom is precious. But what do we mean when we say we are free? It seems that freedom is less a word with content and is more an incantation. In our early days as a nation, Patrick Henry, cried out, "Give me liberty or give me death." Apart from liberty, he said, we were left in "slavery."⁹

Given the social realities of the day, it was an ironic way to say it. The irony was not lost on Abigail Adams. In letters written to her husband John Adams during the meeting of the Continental Congress, she wrote, "It always seemed a most iniquitous scheme to me—[to] fight ourselves for what we are daily robbing and plundering from those who have as good a right to freedom as we have."¹⁰ She was, of course, speaking of slavery.

Sixty years later, Frederick Douglass asked, "What to the American Slave is your Fourth of July?" His response? "It is a day that reveals the gross injustice and cruelty to which he is the constant victim...Your celebration is a sham."¹¹

Freedom is complex and at times illusive. Our understanding of freedom has evolved over time. FDR provided different content to the meaning of freedom. "Freedom means the supremacy of human rights everywhere." He said Americans would stand for the freedom of speech, the freedom to worship, freedom from want and fear... everywhere in the world.

Holy week is a lesson on freedom. Jesus was riding on Zechariah's donkey. They knew the promise of the old prophet and so did he. He was the new king who had come to set them free. They paved his way with palm branches. They sang the songs of salvation. They looked deep into the eyes of their children and said, "Remember this day. We are free. Hosanna!"

Admittedly, they were a bit confused about the freedom he would bring; but they were not wrong that he had come to free them, to free us all.

For the past decade, our nation has been at war. We have wandered a long way from who we were during WWII. In those days everyone claimed responsibility to sacrifice for freedom. But not today. Today sacrifice is delegated to the soldiers, and it is the citizen's job to shop.

It appears that the modern American understanding of freedom is to be free from sacrifice. I am free because I am free to do and be and get and have anything I want. This understanding of freedom is fundamentally flawed because it is freedom without responsibility. It is an immature freedom. Like that of Mrs. McIntyre, this is a freedom rooted in the certainty of what is *not* my responsibility.

Jesus provides a richer understanding of freedom. This parade does not lead

to a crown, but to a crown of thorns. He is riding headlong into the shadow of the cross.

Mrs. McIntyre's said, "It is not my responsibility that Mr. Guizac has nowhere to go," "I don't find myself responsible for all the extra people in the world." She was talking to a priest—an odd relationship as she had no interest in things religious. But the priest persisted: "When God sent his Only Begotten Son, Jesus Christ Our Lord...as a Redeemer to mankind, He...."

"Father Flynn!"... "As far as I'm concerned Christ was just another [displaced person.] I'm going to let that man go," she said. "I don't have any obligation to him." It is hard to tell if she means she has no obligation to Mr. Guizac or to Jesus. It doesn't matter; either way she lets go of them both.

It's not Mrs. McIntyre, but Jesus who is free. Jesus is free because he rode into Jerusalem to break bread. He is free because he rode into Jerusalem to pray through the mid-night hour. He is free because he spoke truth to power, because he took up his cross and shed the blood of the new covenant.

When you look deeply into the eyes of your children, tell them He rode into Jerusalem to instruct us that until we know our responsibilities, particularly to the extra people, we will never be free.

Notes

- 1 Lamar Williamson, Jr., *Mark: Interpretation, A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1983), 37.
- 2 E. T. Thompson, *The Gospel According to Mark* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1954), 38.
- 3 Joel Marcus, *Mark 1-8: The Anchor Bible* (Yale and London: Doubleday, 2000), 169-170.
- 4 Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (Boston, New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2006).
- 5 Bart D. Ehrman, *God's Problem: How the Bible Fails to Answer Our Most Important Question---Why we Suffer* (New York: HarperCollins, 2009).
- 6 Frederick Buechner, *Now and Then* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1983), 54-55.
- 7 J. Matthew Sleeth, M.D. "The Power of a Green God," *The Green Bible* (New York: Harper Collins, 2008), 1-17.
- 8 Flannery O'Connor, "The Displaced Person," *Flannery O'Connor: The Complete Stories* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1971), 226, 229.
- 9 Patrick Henry, "Give me Liberty or Give me Death!" *Lend me your ears: Great Speeches in History*, rev. ed., ed. William Safire (New York-London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1997), 86.
- 10 David McCullough, *John Adams* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2001), 104.
- 11 Frederick Douglass, "What to the American Slave Is Your Fourth of July," *Speeches that Changed the World* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1998), 227.