

Don't Easter My Lent!

Mark 8:31-38; Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16

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Wilton Presbyterian Church

Just as we did last week, we begin this morning with the concept of covenant. Covenant/deep and abiding relationship with God, who knows us and calls us by name, is the context through which we are invited to walk through these days of reflection, redirection and refocus in Lent.

Last week we read about the covenant God made between God and Noah as well as the rest of humankind...how the rainbow would be a sign for all eternity that God was done with killing. No more would God act to wipe out humanity. Instead, God's love and grace would reign and the sign of the rainbow is the reminder of that promise.

This week's text refers to the covenant God makes with Abram and Sarai. After many, many year of waiting, after having been told to leave their homeland, they are now promised blessings which will last for generations to come. They are given a new calling, land and purpose. As a symbol of that transformation, God gives them new names/new identities.

The message for us? With a God like this, none of us is past our day in God's reign; whether in the dawn or in the dusk of our lives this sort of God has something important for each of us, in spite of our doubts and cynicism.

The book of Genesis is all about beginnings: of creation; of humankind; of the children of Israel; of relationship with us. Through all of the ups and downs of those early days, the main message: God loves us. God desires our nearness, our intimacy, our love returned back...

Within that context, we turn to our Gospel passage. We were reminded last week that as followers of Jesus, we too, are given new names: Beloved. In our baptisms we are claimed as God's very own. Important bookmark.

And very quickly we see that real life takes over, and after his baptism, Jesus is driven out into the wilderness and is tempted.

Today our text takes us into the heat of Lent. Jesus foretells of his death and makes the very difficult and serious charge that those who want to follow him must also take up their own crosses and follow him through death.

That's not a good selling point, friends. That's not even a popular topic for sermons...even during Lent. It's difficult to preach on sacrifice and death...So many of us want uplifting, hopeful topics because our lives are difficult. Why on earth would we want to take on more existential topics?

The title of the sermon is: *Don't Easter My Lent*, is a title not original to me. It was the title of a blog post which the Co-Moderator of our denomination, Jan Edmiston, wrote recently. Each year at this time, many in the Christian faith want to rush through the more difficult parts/topics of Lent and get to the joy of Easter. But Edmiston says this:

This is the season when we remember that death is part of life and we are called to notice it. We are called to face it. We are called to let the reality of death re-prioritize our lives.

This is the time when it becomes less important to talk about how hard I have worked for all my toys than it is to work so that others get toys.

This is the time to embrace activities that not only give me life, but they give others life too.

Lent reminds us that there is a world of suffering out there. How are we offering ourselves to stand with those who suffer?

<https://achurchforstarvingartists.wordpress.com/2018/02/22/dont-easter-my-lent/>

Back in the summer of 1986, I first learned the phrase The Ministry of Presence. It was during my first unit of Clinical Pastoral Education, a program for seminarians to learn the clinical skills of pastoral care usually within a hospital setting. It would be the first experience for me of many others I would take to learn the art of what it means just to “be with” someone in whatever they are facing.

Ministry of Presence

“Ministry of presence” is a favorite phrase of chaplains to describe how they work -- with or without words - to be the vehicle of God’s love when they enter the room of a dying patient, the cell of a prisoner, the cubicle of an employee, or the fox hole of a frightened soldier. Francis of Assisi expressed it well when he said, “Preach the Gospel at all times and when necessary use words.”

Julie is a mission co-worker in Africa. Much of her time is spent visiting, day after day, month after month, until enough trust is earned that someone opens up. But she says, those days are not lost.

“When a woman in this culture is introducing you to another woman, they will say, ‘This is So-and-so, and when my father died she came for two days, and when my daughter was married, she was there. When I was sick she came to the hospital with fruit.’ They give a resume of how you showed up in their life as a way of introduction.” Profound.

An important part of the Ministry of Presence is the Ministry of Silence. It’s not a passive act of all. Listening and being present in silence takes great courage and strength. I remember when I went down to visit my father when he was in the hospital dying of cancer at age 56. He specifically said he didn’t want my sisters and me to come and visit him there. But we each went anyway. I don’t know why he made that request, maybe he felt he would have to talk when he didn’t want to. So I quietly sat in the room with him for hours. Just the two of us. He went in and out of sleep. I silently prayed some and sat and read to myself. The next year he would end up dying, but I remember that as sacred time.

Ministry of Tears is also an important part of the Ministry of Presence. Being able to join someone in their grief without trying to get them to stop because you and I are uncomfortable is a grace-filled act. Jesus did that when he heard of the death of his friend Lazarus.

Chaplain Kate Braestrup of the Maine Warden Service said in an interview about her work, “...I’m not really here to keep you from freaking out. I’m here to be with you while you freak out, or grieve or laugh or suffer or sing. It is a ministry of presence. It is showing up with a loving heart. And it is really, really cool.”

But the ministry of presence is not reserved just for those who are trained, it’s a ministry to which we are each invited to participate...But make no mistake, it’s difficult, because our natural impulse is to jump in and solve or act or teach. That’s what Peter did in the passage this morning, right? He tried to tell Jesus not to talk about his death...and Jesus rebuked him, saying “Get behind me, Satan!” (Just a quick note...the word in the Greek is not how we think of Satan or the Devil. Jesus rebuked Peter as promoting a distraction—not that he was evil incarnate.)

Actually, this congregation has a long-standing practice of the Ministry of Presence. We heard about the beautiful and sacred work this morning by our teens who went to be with and work alongside the homeless and working poor of Washington, DC.

After church, a group of our women will go to sit with women who are in early recovery from substance abuse at Liberation Program's rehab facility in Norwalk. They will be baking bread and collaging with the women while visiting with them. That's extremely spiritual work.

The important thing is to be available. I read a post by a woman named Jill Briscoe, who has done many short-term mission projects. "The main thing I am learning is just to go. When I get to wherever we have been invited to be, we are most times met with the same words. In many different languages we hear, "You came! You came! You didn't send a book, or tapes, clothes or medicine, not even money or Bibles; you came to us!"

In a world which has an epidemic of people who feel desperately lonely, this is the Good News of the Gospel, that we are not alone in this life. God is with each of us in covenant, but when that is difficult to feel, we can be God's arms, ears, and God's very presence with each other.

So friends, treasure this time. Be with one another in their grief, in their pain, in their difficult journeys and be blessed in this sacred season.

Amen.