

Squandered Love, Abundant Grace

Ash Wednesday and the first Sunday in Lent bring into focus one of the great questions of humans – who am I? On Wednesday we knelt and received ashes on our forehead and reminded ourselves that we are dirt, carbon beings that will return to the earth when breath no longer fills our lungs and supplies oxygen to our brains. It's a solemn ritual after which we were invited by Pastor Tom to begin our journey toward the cross through choosing a spiritual practice that will bring us closer to God, and that will help us to know ourselves better, too. Our Lenten journeys help us answer the question, who am I? Our gospel for this first Sunday in Lent is Luke's version of Jesus' testing in the wilderness.

Identity is part of this testing in the wilderness for Jesus. Twice, the devil begins his temptations by saying, "If you are the Son of God..." In using this address, the devil seems to be enticing Jesus not only to distractions from God's plan, but testing Jesus with his identity, too. Will Jesus reject God's proclamation that he, Jesus, is Son of God and has pleased God? But, Jesus doesn't bite. He rejects all three temptations with scripture from Deuteronomy. These verses seemingly roll off of Jesus' mind and heart with admirable ease. Jesus, Son of God, nurtured by his family and study of Hebrew scripture, strengthened by God's proclamation at his baptism his baptism and filled with the Holy Spirit turns the devil down.

Baptism is one of our rituals that give identity and shape to our lives as Christians. In baptism, even if you don't remember it, but have seen someone else's baptism, you know that you are claimed as a child of God, receive the Holy Spirit, and are welcomed into the community of Christ.

In Deuteronomy we hear identity giving words that shape the people of Israel as people of God in their long-awaited Promised Land. Your identity, says Moses, will be an inheritance of land, of giving the first fruits of the harvest to God and remembering God's saving acts on your behalf. Identity, Moses reminds them and us, is formed from the past, present and future with God.

A past, present and future that is grounded in a God of love beyond our understanding that is Psalm 91. A loving God that shelters us, that is our rock. A God strong enough to protect you from capture, to save you from famine and swift enough to raise you when you fall short. A God that loves us enough to provide angels to guard us and big enough to hold us in the divine palm.

These verses from God read as love letters from our creator. Words that remind us we are beloved children of God. That we are God's people and we are loved extravagantly, abundantly and to great lengths.

This love gets us through the wilderness, the lurking temptations and illusions of grandeur that can be so alluring and often hidden deep beneath good intentions. A wilderness that leaves us dry and thirsty.

A wilderness world where two teenagers were arrested with a knife and gun out in Washington state with plans to kill a classmate and perhaps others. A wilderness world where the climate continues to change with adverse consequences for multiple species and future generations. Fillibusters and furloughs slow an already slow and contentious government.

But, the wilderness is not only “out there”, outside of us. It’s also inside of us. It parches our throats...leaves us thirsty. Each of us is a contributor to the wilderness. We are part of the problem. This is not new news...

One time a London newspaper sought the help of its subscribers in addressing the problem of evil. Readers were invited to send in their responses to the question, What is wrong with the world today? The best response of all was also the briefest. It read, Dear Sir, I am. Yours faithfully, G.K. Chesterton.¹

Biographies and Wikipedia track Chesterton’s journey from interest in the occult at a younger age to what he termed “Orthodox Christianity” and finally his journey to and conversion to Roman Catholicism.

Is it possible that Chesterton could say this precisely because he has engaged in the practice of Lent? I don’t know about Chesterton’s Lenten practice, but he is well known for his defense of Christianity, so, it might, indeed, be that he engaged this season and journey to the cross as part of his faith life.

And, so, we have begun our Lenten journey. A journey of self-examination and reflection, of praying and works of love, of meditation and sharing our resources. A journey that will allow us to acknowledge that we are part of what’s wrong with the world and that we are deeply loved by a God who abides with us through the wilderness.

Our story, our identity as God’s beloved children is both celebration and suffering; feasting and fasting; both Promised Land of milk and honey and wilderness. A story of both of squandered love and of God’s abundant grace.

Now, I don’t mean to say that God sends suffering because we turn away and squander God’s love. I don’t believe God sends suffering and pain into the world. I believe these are consequences of our actions, of our sin.

¹ [Sermon Nuggets](#), Lent 1C, 2013, Lindy Black. Illustrations, humor, questions, quotations.

Deuteronomy 26:1-11
Romans 10:8b-13
Luke 4:1-13

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From Jesus' experience in the wilderness we learn what tools we can use to resist temptations. We are beloved children of God. You have been marked with the sign of the cross and received the Holy Spirit. The Spirit filled Jesus and fills us during our wilderness hunger and thirst for more...more money, more power, more house with a white picket fence and 2.5 children...whatever the temptation, whatever wilderness that we are caught up in, of our own creation or the wilderness that finds us, leaving us hungry and thirsty, none of it, not one thing is beyond God.

This Lent, you are invited to slow down and listen, to walk with Jesus as he turns toward Jerusalem and the cross. Maybe you will be refreshed through the online devotional. Maybe you will be by gathering with a friend you haven't seen in a long time and just listening.

I'm going to be slowing down by giving up my car one day a week. Now, I'm not doing this because I love my car so much, although I am grateful for it, but I'm doing it because I am very dependent on that thing! And, I pack more into my day with the ease of getting around. And, I can even be known as a tempted to distraction driver. All of this leaves me thirsty and hungry. So, for Lent, Thursdays are my car-less or car-free days. If you want to see me on Thursdays, we better make it metro, bus, or maybe even bike accessible!

Whatever you are giving up or picking up on your Lenten journey may Jesus quench your thirst with healing grace. May Lent help you to recognize the actions and sins that squander God's love and may this journey create space to experience God's love and grace abundantly fully, to drink from the source of living water and live.

Amen.