

The Sunday Missive -- March 6, 2022

The First Sunday in Lent

Hymn 150 Forty Days and Forty Nights

Forty days and forty nights thou wast fasting in the wild;
Forty days and forty nights tempted, and yet undefiled.

Should not we thy sorrow share and from worldly joys abstain,
Fasting with unceasing prayer, strong with thee to suffer pain?

Keep, O keep us, Savior dear, ever constant by thy side;
That with thee we may appear at the eternal Eastertide.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RjXe6B7g5gE>

The Collect of the Day

Almighty God, whose blessed Son was led by the Spirit to be tempted by Satan: Come quickly to help us who are assaulted by many temptations; and, as you know the weaknesses of each of us, let each one find you mighty to save; through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. *Amen.*

Deuteronomy 26:1-11

When you have come into the land that the Lord your God is giving you as an inheritance to possess, and you possess it, and settle in it, you shall take some of the first of all the fruit of the ground, which you harvest from the land that the Lord your God is giving you, and you shall put it in a basket and go to the place that the Lord your God will choose as a dwelling for his name. You shall go to the priest who is in office at that time, and say to him, "Today I declare to the Lord your God that I have come into the land that the Lord swore to our ancestors to give us." When the

priest takes the basket from your hand and sets it down before the altar of the Lord your God, you shall make this response before the Lord your God: "A wandering Aramean was my ancestor; he went down into Egypt and lived there as an alien, few in number, and there he became a great nation, mighty and populous. When the Egyptians treated us harshly and afflicted us, by imposing hard labor on us, we cried to the Lord, the God of our ancestors; the Lord heard our voice and saw our affliction, our toil, and our oppression. The Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with a terrifying display of power, and with signs and wonders; and he brought us into this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey. So now I bring the first of the fruit of the ground that you, O Lord, have given me." You shall set it down before the Lord your God and bow down before the Lord your God. Then you, together with the Levites and the aliens who reside among you, shall celebrate with all the bounty that the Lord your God has given to you and to your house.

Psalm 91

You who live in the shelter of the Most High* Who abide in the shadow of the Almighty,

Will say to the Lord, "My refuge and my fortress* My God, in whom I trust."

For God will deliver you from the snare of the fowler* And will cover you with his pinions.

Under God's wings you will find refuge* Whose faithfulness is buckler and shield.

You will not fear the terror of the night* Nor the arrow that flies by day,

Nor the plague that prowls in the darkness* Nor the scourge that lays waste at midday.

Because you have made the Lord your refuge* The Most High your dwelling place,

For God will command his angels concerning you* To guard you in all your ways.

On their hands they will bear you up* So that you will not dash your foot against a stone.

Those who love me, I will deliver* I will protect those who know my name.

When they call to me, I will answer them* I will be with them in trouble, I will rescue them and honor them.

Romans 10:5-15

Moses writes concerning the righteousness that comes from the law, that “the person who does these things will live by them.” But the righteousness that comes from faith says, “Do not say in your heart, ‘Who will ascend into heaven?’” (that is, to bring Christ down) “or ‘Who will descend into the abyss?’” (that is, to bring Christ up from the dead). But what does it say? “The word is near you, on your lips and in your heart” (that is, the word of faith that we proclaim); because if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For one believes with the heart and so is justified, and one confesses with the mouth and so is saved. The scripture says, “No one who believes in him will be put to shame.”

For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; the same Lord is Lord of all and is generous to all who call on him. For, “Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.” But how are they to call on one in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in one of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone to proclaim him? And how are they to proclaim him unless they are sent? As it is written, “How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!”

Hymn 529 In Christ There is No East or West

In Christ there is no East or West, in him no South or North,
But one great fellowship of love throughout the whole wide earth.

Join hands, disciples of the faith, whate'er your race may be!
Who serves my Father as his child is surely kin to me.

In Christ now meet both East and West, in him meet South and North,
All Christly souls are one in him, throughout the whole wide earth.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=24CsRD1BMhM>

Luke 4:1-13

Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, where for forty days he was tempted by the devil. He ate nothing at all during those days, and when they were over, he was famished. The devil said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread." Jesus answered him, "It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone.'" Then the devil led him up and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. And the devil said to him, "To you I will give their glory and all this authority; for it has been given over to me, and I give it to anyone I please. If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours." Jesus answered him, "It is written, 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.'" Then the devil took him to Jerusalem, and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here, for it is written, 'He will command his angels concerning you, to protect you,' and 'On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.'" Jesus answered him, "It is said, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'" When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time.

When Will We Ever Learn? Lent 1C

John Shelby Spong observed: "We must keep our minds open to the possibility that the story might have grown in the transmission -- not the essential experience but the way it is described. Please recognize there is a difference between an experience which is real and eternal and the way anybody explains the experience at any given moment in time. The explanation always warps the experience in time."

In our reading from Deuteronomy (some seven or eight hundred years after the fact), Moses is reported to have said to the Israelites: "A wandering Aramean was my ancestor; he went down into Egypt and lived there as an alien, few in number, and there he became a great nation, mighty and populous." We have heard about all this recently in the stories of Joseph. So far so good. Perhaps Joseph's abilities have been exaggerated a bit, but the whole thing seems plausible. Stealing people from their native land and enslaving them, only to have them hold high office after eight or ten generations is not just ancient history.

Moving on... "When the Egyptians treated us harshly and afflicted us with hard labor, we cried to the God of our ancestors, who heard and saw our affliction and toil and brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand, a terrifying display of power." This is an example of the experience to which Spong refers. Religiously-minded folks who succeed in something, say that God was spectacularly on their side. When they fail, God must have been horrendously against them. The experience of success or failure is transformed into salvation history .

Neither is this an ancient proclivity only. We have heard modern-day Americans declare that God has brought about certain election results. Well that would make for a pretty powerful mandate if it were true, but we really ought to bear in mind the fact that the Israelites had been wandering in the desert for forty years when Moses gave this speech, and his campaign platform was to instill enough belief and courage in his people for them to be able to overrun Jericho and Canaan, eliminate their peoples, gobble up their milk and honey, and build themselves some affordable housing. Can we go back and reassess those three thousand-year-old events with a view toward

altering their outcome? No. We are reluctant, not to say disinclined to go back even three, thirty-three or three hundred and three years to fully redress the things done in God's name by our folks that we now know are wrong.

But of course, we must continue trying to do better, try to head off our convenient rationalizations before they continue to cause us to take God's name in vain again and again and again. Certainly it was dastardly the way those Egyptians treated the Israelites. But one message of the Bible would seem to be that the Israelites took their escape from Egypt as a license to do some terrible things themselves, which led to their destruction – again and again. In the words of the great Pete Seeger, “Where have all the graveyards gone? Gone to flowers every one. When will they ever learn?”

“If the Lord had not been on our side...” cries the psalmist, “...when men rose up against us, they would have swallowed us alive when their anger was kindled. Blessed be the Lord who did not give us as prey Indeed the snare has been broken and we have escaped.” Yes, the Lord was on our side and is always on our side, when we are ensnared and toiling under oppression. But it doesn't follow that the Lord will stay on our side if and when we become oppressors ourselves. It is vainglorious arrogance to think that the Lord is on our side whatever we do.

In today's passage from the letter to the Romans, Paul begs this question, asking: “What does it say? It says, ‘The word is near you, on your lips and in your heart.’ For one believes with the heart and so is justified, and one confesses with the mouth and so is saved.” In other words, pay attention to your heart and express your heart's intentions with your lips. Listen for the Word of God in your heart and let that Word come alive in your thoughts, your words and your actions. And what is this word that Jesus came to reveal? Is it triumph, dominion, riches and power at any cost for anyone who can take it?

No. God is not on the side of the winners, God is on the side of the godly. God does not provide a justification for domination, nor a blind eye turned to misery. God is on the side of those who sacrifice their own comfort for the sake of those who are impoverished. God is on the side of those whose eager desire is to act lovingly to all Creation.

What can it mean when Paul says, “There is no distinction between Jew and Greek; the same Lord is Lord of all and is generous to all who act in love, and “Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.” In Paul’s time, there was hardly a greater distinction than that between Jew and Greek. If he weren’t in their prison, he might also have said, ‘between Jew and Roman.’

The Lord God is generous to all who act in love. That is a pretty clear understanding, and belief in God has to mean belief in that understanding, despite the sorrows of this earthly life. God knows perfectly well that the only proof of God’s self that matters is the spirit of belief. Any other kind of supposed evidence of God’s favour is just an idol, and will never be enough for us. God knows how much it has been tried. The Israelites are punished for trying it in the form of a golden calf. We will always blunder and fail when we try to obtain proof. Our very present help and our only hope is in welcoming the possibility of God into our hearts and showing forth that possibility, ‘not only with our lips, but in our lives.’

The great scholar of comparative religions [Wilfred Cantwell Smith](#) pointed out that when the King James Bible was printed in 1611, “to believe” meant something like “to hold dear.” He wrote: “The affirmation ‘I believe in God’ used to mean: ‘Given the reality of God as a fact of the universe, I hereby pledge to Him my heart and soul. I committedly opt to live in loyalty to Him. I offer my life to be judged by Him, trusting His mercy.’ Stanford professor T.M. Luhrman explains, “Today the statement, “I believe in God” may be taken by some as meaning: ‘Given the uncertainty as to whether there be a God or not, as a fact of modern life, I announce that my opinion is yes.’”

She goes on: “The role of belief in religion is greatly overstated, as anthropologists have long known. In 1912, Émile Durkheim, one of the founders of modern social science, argued that religion arose as a way for social groups to experience themselves as groups. He thought that when people experienced themselves in social groups they felt bigger than themselves, better, more alive — and that they identified that aliveness as something supernatural. Religious ideas arose to make sense of this experience of being part of something greater. Durkheim thought that belief was more like a flag than a philosophical position:

You don't go to church because you believe in God; rather, you believe in God because you go to church.

In fact, you can argue that religious belief as we now conceptualize it is an entirely modern phenomenon. But when we "bring the first of the fruit of the ground that you, O Lord, have given us." What we call Time, Talent and Treasure nowadays, and we "set it down before the Lord. Then you, together with the Levites and the aliens who reside among you," (in other words, everyone) "shall celebrate the bounty you have been given," (and presumably carry a charitable spirit out into the world with love).

As the phrase goes, "We came, we came to, we came to believe." Which is to say we gather, we contemplate, we take to heart the love that is God. That is the power of belief that makes us able to bring comfort and healing to our weary and frightened world. "How beautiful upon the earth are the feet of those who bring good news!"

Hymn 142 Lord, Who Throughout These 40 Days

Lord, who throughout these forty days for us didst fast and pray,
Teach us with thee to mourn our sins and close by thee to stay.

As thou with Satan didst contend and didst the victory win,
O give us strength in thee to fight, in thee to conquer sin.

As thou didst hunger bear and thirst, so teach us, gracious Lord,
To die to self, and chiefly live by thy most holy Word.

Abide with us, that so, this life of doubt and hope and pain,
An Easter of unending joy we may at last attain!

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jzqjglKoEpU>

Welcome Morning

There is joy
in all:
in the hair I brush each morning,
in the Cannon towel, newly washed,
that I rub my body with each morning,
in the chapel of eggs I cook
each morning,
in the outcry from the kettle
that heats my coffee
each morning,
in the spoon and the chair
that cry "hello there, Anne"
each morning,
in the godhead of the table
that I set my silver, plate, cup upon
each morning.

All this is God,
right here in my pea-green house
each morning
and I mean,
though often forget,
to give thanks
to faint down by the kitchen table
in a prayer of rejoicing
as the holy birds at the kitchen window
peck into their marriage of seeds.

So while I think of it,
let me paint a thank-you on my palm
for this God, this laughter of the morning,
lest it go unspoken.

The Joy that isn't shared, I've heard,
dies young.

Anne Sexton