
It's Lent. Wake Up!
Westway United Church and Martin Grove United Church
March 10, 2019
by Rev. Dr. Paul Shepherd

Based on Luke 4:1-13

How many of us like alarm clocks? How many of us use alarm clocks? How many of us really needed an alarm clock this morning because of the time change? How many of us woke up this morning and were not sure what time it was because we couldn't remember which of our clocks adjusted for daylight savings automatically and which ones did not? Today is the first Sunday in Lent, known in the trade as "Alarm Clock Sunday". Do you know why?

Alarm clocks are very useful, and not only because they wake us up. Alarm clocks are also useful because alarm clocks make us realize that - in our society - there are 4 kinds of people. And you can tell what type of person you are by the way you react to your alarm clock.

First, we have "sleepers". These are people who sleep regardless of how many alarm clocks they have and how loud they are. These are the people who sleep through anything and everything. These are the people who will buy the loudest alarm clock they can find, but in practice the clock will wake up everyone else in the house, or dorm, while they themselves sleep on peacefully.

Then, we have the "snoozers". These are the people who just love the snooze button on their alarm clock. Snoozers seem very conflicted. Obviously they want to get up or they would not set an alarm at all, but when the alarm goes off it's always later, later, later. Personally I can't understand snoozers. I don't even like being woken up once a day but snoozers want to be woken up 4 or 5 times every day.

Next, we have the people we could perhaps call "fallers". These are people who wake up when the alarm goes off, perhaps they even sit up in bed. But they are very disoriented. They can't quite figure out who they are. They can't quite remember why they set the alarm in the first place. So, after they turn off their alarm clock, they fall back into bed and go back to sleep.

The fourth group we can call “wakers”. These are the people who hear their alarm, wake up, get up, and get on with their lives.

Now do you know why the first Sunday in Lent is called “Alarm Clock Sunday”? Not yet? That’s ok!

Lent is a period of 46 days during which we are invited to reflect on our lives, our faith, our understand of God, our understanding of self, our understanding of community. In other words, Lent is a time of spiritual awakening, and spiritual wisdom. Or not. It depends on how we respond to the wake-up call. Lent is a time of spiritual awakening. So the first Sunday in Lent is the alarm clock going off, inviting us into a spiritual adventure. How do we choose to respond to the alarm?

Sleepers just continue to sleep. They don’t even hear the invitation to a spiritual awakening. Sleepers go from pancakes on Shrove Tuesday to chocolate bunnies on Easter Sunday and don’t even realize that they missed Lent. Snoozers say yes, Lent is a great idea. I should pray more. I should meditate more. I’ll start that tomorrow, or the next day, or the next day, or ... look at that, it’s Easter already. Fallers say yes, Lent is important. They come to Ash Weds. They buy the lenten group book. They give up chocolate. But it doesn’t last. Fallers don’t finish the lenten book, and they only give up chocolate for a little before they hit the chocolate again, using the lame excuse that giving up something for Lent is just a silly superstition. Fallers fall back into old ways before they give themselves a chance to actually transform their lives. Wakers hear the lenten call, engage in daily or weekly practices - like participating in our lenten groups, or daily prayer, or visiting with people. They look for spiritual growth in their own lives. They look for increasing maturity. And they find it.

So there is only really 1 message on the first Sunday on Lent, “Wake Up!”

Now that we are all awake - or too afraid to pretend otherwise, we are all invited into the journey of Lent. And I want to open Lent with a story about “journey”.

[slide: image of different journeys]

5 people were out hiking in a vast forest when they came to realize that they were lost. They all wanted to get back to the village where they had started from, but they

were truly lost. The 1st person decided they were going to go left, because of their intuition. The 2nd person said they were going to go right because it just felt right. The 3rd person said they were going to go back on their original path, because that was the safest option. The 4th person said they were convinced the group was already going in the right direction, so they went straight ahead. The 5th person, well they really didn't know what was the right direction. So they climbed a tall tree to look around and got a better view. And when they did, they did in fact see the village and got a good sense of the quickest path to get there. Well, there is nothing surprising in any of that. We usually expect that when we rise above a situation we see a bigger picture and we come up with the best answer, right?

Well sort of and sometimes, but not in this case. Because the story doesn't end there. The 5th person now knew the quickest path back to the village, but they decided that they were in fact right, and that the other 4 people were wrong. The 5th person thought they had the only correct path back to the village. But here's what actually happened.

The 1st person went left and found a path back to the village, but it was a long path. Mind you, along the way the person saw beautiful scenery. Amazing scenery that you would not even get a glimpse of on the quickest path. The 2nd person went right and had to fight off a pack of wolves, but in the process they learned how to survive in the forest and gained a huge sense of accomplishment, and they did make it back to the village. The 3rd person walked back along the known path and ran into another group of hikers, and made life-long friends that day, and then made it back to the village. The 4th person continued straight, ran into a farm, and stayed as a guest of the family for 3 days learning all about farming and the joys of rural life before going back to the village. And the 5th person had a relatively short but very boring walk back to the village.

So who took the "best" path back to the village? Is there even a best path?

Life is sometimes about being right and wrong, but most of the time it is really not about that at all. Life is about gaining your own experiences of life and finding your own path, in the company of others. Every decision we make offers new experiences for us, which is how we grow.

In school, when you were given a test, you knew that everyone in your class was given the exact same questions and the answers were known - the teacher knew right and wrong. Were any of us - in school - ever tempted to look over at a friend's paper so we could copy from them?

But what if during a test each of us was given a different question paper? A different test? In life - trust me - we do not all get the same question papers. During life, and during Lent, each of us are invited to walk our own path while we also learn from the experiences of others. This Lent, engage in your own journey, knowing that although it is your path, you are surrounded in this church by caring people who are happy to share our journeys together too. It is your journey, but that doesn't mean that you have to journey alone. And yes, please participate in our lenten groups as part of your journey.

Well - now we've all been invited to wake up to a spiritual adventure and we have been reminded the each of us has our own personal spiritual journey. But what sort of journey might we be on? I want to propose that - this year - that we view Lent as a season of temptation. I mean, at some point I have to start using more religious words, right? And temptations can be seen as a spiritual tool, because recognizing how we feel about whatever it is that tempts us can lead us to better self-understanding. And knowing ourselves is a meaningful step on any journey.

[slide: temptation]

Jesus was tempted in the desert. We are often tempted by the dessert. Beyond that terrible joke is there much more to say about temptation? I sure hope so! If we consider the temptations of Jesus that we just read in Luke, do you notice anything common between the three temptations? I think what is common is that all of the 3 activities that Jesus is tempted to do are all good things. Think about the temptation to turn rocks into bread. Imagine if Jesus had accepted that mission. Jesus could have fed the world. Think of that - a world that does not know hunger. Or, think of the temptation for Jesus to rule the world. Don't we imagine that having Jesus as a benevolent dictator might actually be a wonderful idea? Particularly compared to the spoiled brats that are currently running things? Think of that - a world that does not know inequality. Jesus was tempted by very good things. But Jesus rejects those temptations because his

mission lied elsewhere.

And what about us? How often have we been tempted by something that was “good”, and settled for that even though we knew we had a more important mission, that we could do better than “good”. For example, how many of us have given up chocolate for Lent. Well, that’s good. But we can do better. Giving up chocolate for a short period will not really change your life or the lives of those around you. How about giving up something more important? What’s more important than chocolate you ask?

I’m glad you asked. Here is a short list of things you might want to give up for Lent this year: fear of failure, feelings of unworthiness, impatience, trying to make everyone happy, comparing yourself to others, passing the buck, being overcommitted to the point that you accomplish nothing, feelings of entitlement, apathy, hatred, negativity, being a complainer, settling for happiness instead of joy, bitterness, lack of commitment to what is important to you, mediocrity, worrying, idolizing others, being resistant to change, pride, holding a small view of God, being envious, being ungrateful, resisting forgiveness.

Give up those things - or at least 1 of them - and you will change your life forever and the lives of those around you. Forget chocolate - give up something that actually matters. And if you finish that list, I can give you an additional list, but you probably won’t need it.

I think that today we are often tempted by one thing that we absolutely have to resist. It’s the biggest temptation at all. It’s the temptation to believe that we are too old, or too weak, or too small, or too poor to help be the kingdom of God in this community. To act as if there is no hope, in spite of the presence of God in our midst.

The biggest temptation is to believe that we cannot change.

Wake up!

Amen.