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The journey of Lent  
Chapel in the Park United Church  
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Based on Genesis 9:8-17 and Mark 1:9-15

So, finally. This is the first Sunday in Lent. Lent is a time for many things. Lent is a time for spiritual renewal. For spiritual practices. For commitments. For new life. It is also a time when the church in its great acumen engages in coruscant conviviality and proficuous ebullience to push into sesquipedalian perspicacity in order to achieve superabundant cicumlocution. Or - in other words - this is the time of year when the church brings out our biggest and most expensive words. This is the time of year that we ask - as we ask each year - wait, what's Ash Wednesday again? What is Lent again? What day of the week is Maundy Thursday this year? And once you have embraced those words, we will offer even more expensive words. What is redemption? What is covenant? What is temptation - really? What is sacrifice - really? What is salvation - really?

Lent - more than any other time of the year - is a time when history, tradition, theology, ritual, and other factors get wrapped together in fascinating and unpredictable ways. It's a good thing that Lent lasts for 46 days so we have time to connect and re-connect. Engage and re-engage in what is an important part of our journey of faith. Lent is a good time to ask questions and to be open to new answers.

I'm not critical of what I call "expensive" words. I just think we need to explore them and not gloss over their deeper meaning. And I'm glad that words still hold so much power for us.

You may recall, our media went nuts a few years ago around the word "temptation". They claimed that the Pope was proposing to change the Lord's Prayer. If you missed the story, the Pope was suggesting that we change the English translation. From "lead us not into temptation" to "do not let us enter into temptation". The pivotal issue was whether or not God would lead us into temptation. Or whether in spite of God's grace, we sometimes enter into temptation ourselves.

To be clear - the Pope was not trying to change the Lord's Prayers. The prayer that

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the Catholic Church often refers to as simply the “Our Father”, or in Latin, “paternoster”. The Pope was only suggesting that the English translation could be improved. It’s a problem with the English version of the Lord’s Prayer that does not exist in Spanish, or French, or Italian, or other languages. But it is a testament to the power of words that our media went crazy over the story. We will come back to temptation in a bit.

Another expensive word for this week is “covenant”. In our reading from Genesis today, the word “covenant” was used 7 times. And in all 7 instances, I think the word was used incorrectly. Covenant has various definitions of course. But I think in all definitions, covenant implies and requires a relationship. Covenant requires connection. Covenants require commitments from at least two parties. During our covenant service today at 2 pm we will include 3 parties: This congregation, Shining Waters Regional Council, and me. Covenant requires relationship. And all of those parties will express commitments to each of the other parties. That’s a covenant. I hope you can be part of that celebration later today.

The covenant named in Genesis today is only a commitment from God to never commit genocide again using a flood. But where is the other half of that commitment? Where is the commitment from Noah? How do we fit into this story anyway?

Perhaps Noah's commitment is implicit. Perhaps - since God slaughtered all the “bad” people, Noah, and by extension - we - must be committed to being “good” people. Perhaps that’s our commitment. The story does not say that. Moreover, how well did that plan work out in the story? How many generations - according to the Bible - did it take before the “good” people that God had spared from the flood were revealed to be so “good” themselves? Good question.

The alleged reason for God to kill everyone except Noah’s family was because all of those other people were wicked. But after the flood, how long did it take before we see extreme evil within Noah’s own family. How long did it take for humanity to go “to hell in a hand-basket” again. You can count the generations on one hand. Actually, you can count the generations on one finger. Because it only took one generation for evil to be apparent in society again.

In verse 9 God is making a covenant with all people - present and future, all of

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humanity. But by verse 25, Noah has already been raped by one of his sons and is condemning that son, Ham, and his descendants, for all time. Even worse, Noah is singling out one of his sons, Shem, for praise. 16 verses after God declares all people to be God's children, Noah is segregating people - and their descendants for all time - back into good and evil.

It's a good thing that the flood story is mythological. Because if it was historical it would be insane. Because the situation at the end of the entire flood story was no better than the situation at the beginning of the flood story. In fact, the situation at the end of the flood story was no different than the situation at the beginning of the story. The flood and the genocide accomplished nothing. I suppose that is not surprising to us. Genocide never accomplishes anything worthwhile.

Perhaps it would have worked better if the covenant had been part of a relationship. Because we - simple humans that we are - need to actually be involved in our own redemption. Our redemption requires relationship. Otherwise it would be like the Canadians who want reconciliation with indigenous people without realizing that all parties must be included at the table for that reconciliation to happen. But that's a different sermon.

We need to be involved in our own redemption. It's a bit ironic, but that message does not really come across in the flood story in the Bible. However, it does come across in a retelling of the flood story from 2007. I mean, of course, in the movie, "Evan Almighty".

In one scene, God is talking to one of the characters. The character had expressed her disappointment that God had not provided what she wanted in life. Simple things like patience, courage, love.

And the God character - played by Morgan Freeman - says, "Let me ask you something. If someone prays for patience, do you think God gives them patience? Or does God give them opportunities to become patient? If someone pray for courage, does God give them courage, or does God give them opportunities to be become courageous?" It's an interesting idea. That when we pray for something, that we are give opportunities to become that thing that we say we want. Opportunities to get better at that thing that we

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claim we want to get better at. It's very natural to pray for a "silver bullet" solution to our problems. But we are involved in our own redemption. Thanks be to God for that!

I wonder if Jesus heard that same call to be involved in redemption in today's gospel story. In the part of the story where Jesus went alone into the wilderness in order to reflect, meditate, and seek clarity around his life and his identity.

I find it interesting that Jesus felt the need to get away, to reflect on life and ministry. In fact, Jesus's trip into the wilderness is a lot like our own call to our Lenten journey this year. Because whatever else Lent means, it is certainly an opportunity. An opportunity to find quiet space and to reflect on our own lives and on our own sense of self and identity. It is an opportunity to find quiet space to reflect on our faith and our own relationships. If Jesus needed time away to reflect, surely we do as well.

When Jesus went to the wilderness to reflect, he faced temptations. In Mark's version, we get no detail about that. But in Matthew, Jesus faces 3 specific temptations. If you remember, the first temptation was for Jesus to turn stones to bread. The second temptation was for Jesus to throw himself off the temple and let angels save him. The third temptation was for Jesus to become master of the whole world. What do you think of those 3 temptations? Do you think they apply to us today? Or if not, are there modern-day equivalent temptations that do apply to us?

Think about the first temptation.

The temptation to turn rocks into bread was the temptation to feed the world. But Jesus rejected that. Jesus is not a baker. Moreover, later on in the gospels, Jesus says, "the poor you will always have with you", and "man does not live by bread alone". And in countless stories in the gospels, Jesus wanders around to many villages speaking and teaching and healing. Jesus does not hand out bread or anything else except his time and his compassion. Those were enough.

What is a modern-day equivalent of that? Or is it still a contemporary temptation? Given that many people in our own community suffer with food insecurity, perhaps it is still relevant. Maybe Jesus should have become a baker after all! But for me, the temptation was to satisfy physical needs while ignoring spiritual and emotional needs. How often are we tempted to write a cheque for some charity half-way around the world

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while we ignore the spiritual and emotional needs of people we walk past on our own streets?

I spend a lot of time with people - including some people who constantly ask for money. But I have observed that money is often not what they need the most. Social isolation and loneliness are now well-established as significant needs right here in our own community. This is actually a great time to be sensitive to the emotional needs in our own community. To help people today, we do not have to look across the world. We just have to look across our own streets.

The modern version of this temptation - I think - is for us to wait for something before we reach out. The opportunity is now. We don't need to wait for anything. I think a modern equivalent to the first temptation is to say, "we'll get to that after something-or-other happens". But salvation can be right now. Our community needs us right now, just as we are.

What about the second temptation?

The temptation to let the angels catch Jesus falling was an invitation to become a miracle worker. To be seen as a freak. But Jesus rejects the image of a miracle worker. Perhaps that's why - particularly in Mark - when Jesus heals someone, he often asks the person to not tell anyone else about it. Jesus performed miracles, but he did not want to limit his ministry to just that - a circus act. Miracles are cool, but they are always limited to a specific time and place. What is a modern equivalent of the temptation of being a miracle worker?

I think I understand the temptation to be a miracle worker from the flip side. In other words, the temptation is to believe that we have to be exceptional people in order to do important things. That we - you and I - are excused from reaching out because we are not exceptional people. The temptation is to think that we need to be miracle workers to make a difference to another person. But that's wrong. All of us - all of us - have the capacity to reach out and help others. I think a modern equivalent of the second temptation is to think that we are not good enough, rich enough, powerful enough to make a difference, and so we do not even try. But again, we already have enough. We already are enough.

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What about the third temptation?

The temptation to become master of the world sounds pretty tempting. But Jesus resists the image of powerful ruler too. Jesus not only spends his ministry with the homeless and unemployed. Jesus spends his ministry as one who himself is homeless and unemployed. What today we might call a “bum”. Seeming to have no interest at all in political power. It’s almost as if Jesus has an image of ministry where he is not the centre of attention. What’s the modern equivalent of the temptation to acquire power?

I doubt that anyone here thinks they amass vast amounts of power and wealth. But how often are we tempted to pretend that we have nothing to learn from others? How often do we fail to listen to the wisdom of all people? Listen to other people carefully, and you will realize that all of us carry fear and pain with us. But at the same time, each of us carries our own deep wisdom. We are all in this together. Power and control are delusions anyway. I think a modern equivalent of the third temptation is to think that we already have all the answers and therefore we don’t need to listen to voices from the margins of society. The temptation is to think that we do not have to listen at all.

I think that if we put Jesus’s temptations in more modern terms, then perhaps they do apply to us after all. I wonder if we are willing - at least during Lent - to consider those temptations and how they might affect our ministry, our faith, and our lives.

Lent is a journey - and an opportunity. Make time for it. Embrace it. Live into it. What is around the next corner of your faith journey? Perhaps by the end of lent you will see just a bit further around that corner. I pray that we all do. Let’s all have a nice trip! And always remember that we do not journey alone. I’ll see you on the path!

*Amen.*