

---

The journey of Lent  
Sydenham-Heritage United Church  
February 21, 2021  
by Rev. Dr. Paul Shepherd

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?

[image: pretzel]

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.

[image: temptation shortcut]

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 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 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.

[image: temptation pizza]

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 legal 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.

[image: noah's ark]

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 story - did it take before the "good" people that God had spared from the flood decided not to be so "good" anymore?

[image: going to hell in a handbasket]

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 humanity. But by verse 25, Noah has already been raped by one of his sons and is condemning that son, Ham, and his descendants, forever. 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. 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 had accomplished nothing.

[image: relationship]

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.

Perhaps 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, the movie, "Evan Almighty".

[image: Evan almighty]

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

[image: Evan almighty coffee shop]

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

[image: lenten pathway]

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 ministry and calling. 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 to turn stones to bread. The second was to throw himself off the temple and let angels save him. The third was to become master of the whole world. What do you think of those 3 temptations? Do you think they apply to us too? Or if not, are there modern-day equivalent temptations that do?

[image: rocks into bread]

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. 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 while we ignore the spiritual and emotional needs of people we see on our own streets? With the pandemic, our traditional ways of sharing food with our community are not working right now. But we are still able to reach out to connect with people who are

---

isolated and lonely. This is actually a great time to be sensitive to the emotional needs in our own community. The modern temptation - I think - is for us to wait for the pandemic to be over 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 the pandemic is over".

[image: leap of faith]

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 valuable 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 don't even try.

[image: not listening]

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 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 power and wealth. But how often are we tempted to pretend that we are in control of things? How often do we fail to listen to

---

the wisdom of all people? Listen to other people carefully, and 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 for voices that are silenced.

So 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.*