

Rev. Dr. Karen Blanchard
“The Blessing of Repentance”
First Presbyterian Church of Kirkwood
Sunday, March 10, 2019

Psalm 91, selected verses

*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 he will deliver you from the snare of the fowler
and from the deadly pestilence;*

*he will cover you with his pinions,
and under his wings you will find refuge;
his faithfulness is a shield and buckler.*

*You will not fear the terror of the night,
or the arrow that flies by day,
or the pestilence that stalks in darkness,
or the destruction that wastes at noonday.*

*A thousand may fall at your side,
ten thousand at your right hand,
but it will not come near you.*

*You will only look with your eyes
and see the punishment of the wicked.*

*Because you have made the Lord your refuge,
the Most High your dwelling-place,
no evil shall befall you,
no scourge come near your tent.*

*For he 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.*

*You will tread on the lion and the adder,
the young lion and the serpent you will trample under foot.*

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 honour them.

With long life I will satisfy them,

and show them my salvation.

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.

Will you pray with me? So we begin the journey trusting that You are always with us. Open our hearts, our minds, to this season, to Your word, to Your love. In the name of your Son, we pray. Amen.

If I'm honest, I feel like there are certain places I've traveled that feel like the wilderness. And I don't always feel very comfortable there. I feel kind of isolated. I think about places such as the remote hills of Scotland where I finally realized how the bagpipe became to be the voice of the Scottish people with its moving and powerful sound. Or miles of saguaro cacti surrounded by scrubby lands north and east of Phoenix. Or the beauty and the barrenness of the land surrounding Ghost Ranch in New Mexico. They do have their own beauty. But I also know that, for me, any place without mature trees and gentle rolling hills feels like the wilderness. There's a sense of remoteness and isolation that's kind of haunting. It's definitely a place set apart, and that's the image I receive when I look at the reading from the Gospel of Luke. It's a scene that comes immediately after Jesus' baptism. A time that was filled with people and the voice of God. But now Jesus goes away to a remote place, we are told, for 40 days. 40 is a familiar number in Scripture. We are told that Moses was on the mountain for 40 days. And the people spent 40 years in the wilderness after leaving Egypt. It is a time that is set apart and a lengthy time.

So Jesus is now fresh from his baptism, about to move in a new direction, that of his ministry and preaching. And it seems as though this wilderness time is a honing process, a time to gain understanding and to prepare for moving in a new direction. But there in the wilderness, he is challenged by the Devil, or the Tempter. The Tempter cajoles him and flatters him. He tries to get Jesus to show just how powerful he is by abusing and using powers for his own benefit, like changing stone into bread. In ways that almost invite him to act like he's a magician, Jesus is faced with challenging events in this time, we are told. And given the insight, we are reminded that Jesus understood sin, the struggle of temptation, the abuse of power, not by watching it from afar, but up close and personal in his own life. We are reminded that he is reminded once again that the power he has is not of his own making but comes from God and can only be utilized as God would use it. I also think this scene is also a reminder to us, when we say to ourselves, "Well, I can't be like Jesus, for Heaven's sake. He didn't have to worry about temptation." But the answer is, oh, yes. Yes, he did. For he was human.

Talking about sin is not easy. It can be very difficult sometimes to be honest with ourselves or about what we have done that has been unfaithful. Some of us are oblivious, some of us prefer to deny sin, and others of us are so hard on ourselves already that when we dwell on it, it becomes a whirling cycle of self-incrimination. But it is something we are called to wrestle with. We're reading a book on the Apostle Paul by N. T. Wright on Tuesday mornings, and in the last chapter we were reading about how the concept of sin became a part of the faith that is practiced by those who share in the God of Abraham. Wright tells us that Paul preached a very different message. Not only that the risen Christ was the long-awaited Messiah, but the startling statement that Jesus died for our sins and for people everywhere. And that was a radical change. The Jewish people had long worshipped one God. They'd been set apart by rituals and practices and laws. The Romans, however, worshipped their emperor as their god. And the Gentiles worshipped local gods at local shrines and sometimes included human sacrifices or offerings, as if to cajole the god, a kind of bribe to get that god to do what one wanted. But Paul preaches about a very different kind of God. Not a distant God to be manipulated or cajoled, but a God who is to be

loved and served within a relationship. Being in relationship with God is something different because it means we are accountable to one another, and we are accountable to one another in love. For us, this begins in baptism and a day like today comes full-circle for our youth who were confirmed. We are told in baptism that we die to sin, but it doesn't mean we no longer sin. It doesn't mean that we have no more temptations or no more accountability for our actions. It means we are called to acknowledge our wrongdoings. To try and temper those things that hurt ourselves, others, and our relationship with God. It's important to remember too that, as Jesus was promised in his baptism, we too are God's beloved. Through him we come to understand mercy and grace in new ways because we are invited into reconciliation within our relationships with God and one another.

So we are called to acknowledge our sins. But that's not the end of the story. We are invited to confess our sins before a merciful God who calls us to turn back and to repent and to restore that relationship. It is not a relationship based on power. It is a relationship based on love and grace. Because the God we love and serve is not just a God of judgement, but a God who seeks our healing and wholeness. Lent, then, is not a season just to focus on confession, but the ways in which we can be healed and made new again. I think of the wonderful piece we sing during confession in the season of Lent . "Come to me, O weary traveler. Come to me with your distress. Come to me you heavy-burdened. Come to me and find your rest." That's the invitation, to trust and to come.

So we do not just focus on confession but on healing, on strengthening faith, learning from our misdeeds, to be aware of our lack of kindness or our abuses of power. Lent is a season for us to walk together not just as individuals, but as a community to share in a journey of reflection and renewal and faith. It's a season for learning more about ourselves, our tendency to judge others, and to acknowledge the ways in which we may need to change. As I reflect on this passage I found myself remembering a situation a number of years ago. I met with a clergy group once a month, and it was a great group. We enjoyed each other, shared ideas and challenges and possibilities. But one of the people there drove me crazy [laughter]. Everything she said annoyed me and ticked me off. And if she wasn't there, that was okay [laughter]. I often left frustrated. And so I decided to do the noble thing. I would pray for her. Praying for her for what, I don't know [laughter]. Maybe she would just get with it and stop doing whatever it was that was driving me crazy. But I noticed after a while things changed. I finally realized she didn't have the problem, I did. I began to wrestle with how I could stop blaming her and look within myself. I don't know exactly what it was that changed things, but I realized one day I was laughing with her and talking and having a wonderful time.

Acknowledging our sins is hard. Lent is not just about judgment and repentance. It is about healing and renewal. Indeed, the very word repentance means in Greek, "turn around." So this is a season for us to turn around and walk back toward God. A season when like weary travelers carrying baggage that we can't seem to get rid of , we open our hearts to God's mercy and grace so we can be relieved of those burdens. God's mercy and grace are powerful gifts not to be taken lightly. It's important for us to remember as Bonhoeffer reflect that the grace we are offered is not cheap grace. It can only be appreciated when we are willing to look deep within. It takes hard work. And it is when we do that that we can realize what a profound gift grace is. Lent then is not something to just get over with and power through but a step-by-step, day-by-day journey. And it prepares us by seeking wisdom and discernment so that joy of Easter can be more real and deeper. It is then that we can more fully appreciate what Jesus did in offering himself on our behalf so that we could come to know healing and find new life.

As I thought about the journey through the wilderness to Easter, I found myself thinking of another time that the family and I were in the wilderness. We were driving from Tucson to Phoenix going along the backroads to find a fairly new Greek Orthodox monastery that had been built there about 10 years ago. Finally, we could see the blue dome of the church rising out of the desert on a hill, the kind of blue dome associated with the churches of the Greek Islands. When we arrived we were astounded. Out of that wilderness in a mere 10 years, there had been an oasis formed of orange groves and palm trees, flower gardens and vegetable gardens and among them chapels for worship. I found it to be an image of the possibilities that can come from time being spent in the wilderness: preparing the soil of our hearts and growing new things, planting our lives in new ways. A time in the wilderness with honest contemplation helps us to grow in faith and find peace of heart and mind. It helps us to repair our brokenness when we open our hearts to the Spirit. So may God's peace be with all of us as we begin this Lent journey together, a journey of repentance and renewal, of hope and healing. Thanks be to God. Amen.