

The Sunday Missive -- February 18, 2024

The First Sunday in Lent

142 Lord, who throughout these forty 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.

And through these days of penitence, and through thy Passiontide,
Yea, evermore, in life and death, Jesus! with us abide.

Abide with us, that so, this life of suffering overpast,
An Easter of unending joy we may attain at last!

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

Hymn 120 (as Gloria)

Above him see the heavenly Dove,
the sign of God the Father's love,
now by the Holy Spirit shed
upon the Son's anointed head.

O Christ, may we baptized from sin,
go forth with you a world to win:
grant us the Holy Spirit's power
to shield us in temptation's hour.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nVlqvU8KcL8>

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.**

Genesis 9:8-17

God said to Noah and to his sons with him, "As for me, I am establishing my covenant with you and your descendants after you, and with every living creature that is with you, the birds, the domestic animals, and every animal of the earth with you, as many as came out of the ark. I establish my covenant with you, that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of a flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth." God said, "This is the sign of the covenant that I make between me and you and every living creature that is with you, for all future generations: I have set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth. When I bring clouds over the earth and the bow is seen in the clouds, I will remember my covenant that is between me and you and every living creature of all flesh; and the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all flesh. When the bow is in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that is on the earth." God said to Noah, "This is the sign of the covenant that I have established between me and all flesh that is on the earth."

Psalm 25

To you, O Lord, I lift up my soul; my God, I put my trust in you* ***Let me not be humiliated, nor let my enemies triumph over me.***

Let none who look to you be put to shame* ***Let the treacherous be disappointed in their schemes.***

Show me your ways, O Lord* ***And teach me your paths.***

Lead me in your truth and teach me* ***For you are the God of my salvation; in you have I trusted all the day long.***

Remember, O Lord, your compassion and love* ***For they are from everlasting.***

Remember not the sins of my youth and my transgressions* ***Remember me according to your love and for the sake of your goodness, O Lord.***

Gracious and upright is the Lord* ***Who teaches sinners in the ways of righteousness.***

Who guides the humble in doing right* ***And teaches the way of goodness to the lowly.***

All the paths of the Lord are love and faithfulness* ***To those who keep the covenants of justice and peace.***

1 Peter 3:18-22

Christ also suffered for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, in order to bring you to God. He was put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit, in which also he went and made a proclamation to the spirits in prison, who in former times did not obey, when God waited patiently in the days of Noah, during the building of the ark, in which a few, that is, eight persons, were saved through water. And baptism, which this prefigured, now saves you-- not as a removal of dirt from the body, but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers made subject to him.

LEVAS 18 Swing low sweet chariot

Swing low, sweet chariot, coming for to carry me home.
Swing low, sweet chariot, coming for to carry me home.

I looked over Jordan, and what did I see coming for to carry me home.
A band of angels coming after me, coming for to carry me home.

If you get there before I do, coming for to carry me home.
Tell all my friends I'm coming too, coming for to carry me home.

I'm sometimes up and sometimes down, coming for to carry me home.
But still my soul feels heavenly bound, coming for to carry me home.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YOe8BHDxv2g>

Mark 1:9-15

In those days, Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw

the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him.

Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news."

Finding Our Barriers -- 1 Lent B

"Guide me in your truth," says the psalmist, "teach me your ways." Begging God to put us in a position of right thinking and its consequent right behavior is a running theme through the psalms; it reflects our desire to be good. Because let's face it, most of us really want to be good, but the clouds get in the way. Whether our enemies, the ones we would overcome by proving them wrong, whether these are barbarians at our gates, or treacherous so-called allies or the parts of ourselves that lead us into thoughts, words and deeds that hurt doesn't matter very much. With the psalmist we pray for the influence, the inspiration and the power to be different and thus bring about different outcomes. If craziness is doing the same thing over and over while expecting different results, we pray for the means and the motivation to do something else instead. It is the only way we can be healed and be sane.

The stories about water and its power to obliterate life are deep within the human experience. Humankind has always known deep, dark water to be a threat to our existence. We can physically drown – by being without air, and by extension, we can psychologically drown – when we are without spirit. Water makes for metaphors we can all understand; it is no coincidence that air and spirit have the same root, or that we talk about drowning when deprived of spirit; in despair.

Because this is such a basic fear of ours, and a fundamental image in our self-expression, we must pay close attention to these water stories to see what they can teach us. The truth that the psalmist talks about wanting to learn goes far beyond simple factuality. We are not praying for God to teach us again that if we are unable to get out of the H₂O, we will end up in

the ER, DOA. We want to know what it means to be spiritually submerged, in the SOUP if you will, and what we have to do to emerge, to come to the surface and breathe free.

Our legend has it that God made humanity to shepherd and steward and supervise the rest of Creation, but we could not be content and obedient; we wandered far away. We like to say God exiled us from Eden, after one tiny little transgression – something to do with an apple – as Flip Wilson used to say, “the Devil made me do it.”

But more truthfully, humanity is continuously testing the limits of decency. The devil is just another part of ourselves. What we call the ‘real world,’ where there is naturally pain and death, simply exists. But evil is something we bring to the party. For example, what other possible explanation is there for the situation we now experience here, where – in the “most-developed,” most powerful, most influential nation the world has ever seen, we can wring our hands, but do nothing while children are frequently killed and wounded in their schools, the one place where they must be kept safe to learn and grow? This is not a freedom we have succeeded in establishing or preserving, this is utter and horrible absurdity; it is a wrong masquerading as a right. It is driven by overt and explicit greed – for the money and the unholy power of violence that guns provide -- in the face of the clear fact that guns are ruining our common life. The devil is our prom date.

We sing our psalms to and worship God who teaches us via his own experience. Today, perhaps more than any other time of year, we begin a time of listening to, learning from and waiting for the transformation that God makes in us if we are willing. God’s experience includes the primordial Creation battle to separate waters from waters so that the Earth might have a place to be. God created humanity to shepherd and steward and supervise all the rest of Creation but, like every parent, God experienced us surprisingly. In a primordial world without evil, we just would not be content and obedient, so God propelled us into the ‘real’ world, where there is evil, pain and death. It is as though we needed the bad in order to recognize the existence of good. What a risk God took with us there. And it seems to have felt to God like a failed experiment; by the time of the flood, God had all but given up on us.

Here is the experience God wanted us to learn from so badly as to goes through it with us. Out of pure anger, God punishes all of Creation, leaving only a handful of randomly chosen survivors, Noah and his family, to start a

new experiment. Basically, God loses it and drowns everybody. God behaves like a human being, an out of control one at that. And the result? No appreciable change in human behavior. So, God changes instead. God forfeits the right to use violent force on humanity and makes a unique promise: Never again. Notice it doesn't say, "Never again, as long as you do what I say." Never again, period. One-sided. Unilateral.

There is a favorite ironic saying in the world of addiction recovery, where the temptation is to blame family members and institutions and circumstances for one's addictive behavior: "Gee, the more I stay sober, the less sick they all get." So, God gets sober, takes the pledge, and swears off deluging forever, with a rainbow flourish to boot.

Because in drowning everybody, God is really drowning God's own self. If the human experiment fails, who else is to blame but God? Emerging from the flood, God makes a solemn promise never to try violence again. Maybe we give up pastries for Lent; God gives up excessive force. Somehow God gains the faith necessary to rely on mercy, forgiveness and love to solve problems, no matter how long it takes. The story is canonized in Genesis, but theologically it belongs right before the birth of Jesus, because it is in the wake of this solemn promise that God gets to thinking, "Well what is the most loving thing I can do for humankind?" and does it.

Can we learn from God's generous experience? Can we become the kind of people who emerge from the waters of baptism free of the need to employ selfish hatred, violence, isolation and self-destructive dependencies in our efforts to breathe free? Are we able to ask ourselves what the most loving things are to do and then do them? And when we are beset by thoughts of actions we know are hurtful to ourselves and others, can we spend our days with the psalmist, yearning for more of the teaching and wisdom and truth that can transform us? Now is the time to try. Our task is not merely to seek love, but to seek and find the barriers within ourselves that we have built against it. "Guide me in your truth O Lord," says the psalmist, "teach me your righteous ways."

Hymn 608 Eternal Father strong to save

Eternal Father, strong to save, whose arm hath bound the restless wave,
Who bidd'st the mighty ocean deep its own appointed limits keep:
O hear us when we cry to thee for those in peril on the sea.

O Christ, whose voice the waters heard and hushed their raging at thy word,
Who walkedst on the foaming deep, and calm amid its rage didst sleep:
O hear us when we cry to thee for those in peril on the sea.

Most Holy Spirit, who didst brood upon the chaos dark and rude,
And bid its angry tumult cease, and give, for wild confusion, peace:
O hear us when we cry to thee for those in peril on the sea.

O Trinity of love and power, thy children shield in danger's hour;
From rock and tempest, fire and foe, protect them wheresoe'er they go;
Thus evermore shall rise to thee glad hymns of praise from land and sea.

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

Guidelines

Here's what you need to do, since time began:
find something—diamond-rare or carbon-cheap,
it's all the same—and love it all you can.

It should be something close—a field, a man,
a line of verse, a mouth, a child asleep—
that feels like the world's heart since time began.
Don't measure much or lay things out or scan;
don't save yourself for later, you won't keep;
spend yourself now on loving all you can.
It's going to hurt. That was the risk you ran
with your first breath; you knew the price was steep,
that loss is what there is, since time began
subtracting from your balance. That's the plan,
too late to quibble now, you're in too deep.
Just love what you still have, while you still can.

Don't count on schemes, it's far too short a span
from the first sowing till they come to reap.
One way alone to count, since time began:
love something, love it hard, now, while you can.

Rhina Espallat