

## Lent

March 1, 2000 at First Church in Cambridge, Congregational, UCC

Lexi Boudreaux

Will you please pray with me? May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be pleasing to you, oh God, our rock and our redeemer, Amen.

This week we have entered yet another season of Lent, the part of our liturgical year where we journey through the wilderness together for 40 days. First Church, I have a question: Is it fair to start the season of Lent if it feels like we've already been in the wilderness for far too long already? This is a question that's crossed my mind recently and it's an easy and natural question to be asking ourselves in this current cultural moment in which we live. It seems as if lately there is more need for Easter lilies and trumpets than temptations in the desert. But as we all know we cannot experience fully the joy of Easter if we have not dwelled in the uncertainty and wandering paths of Lent. We have to do the work.

A few years ago, I switched my Lenten practice from giving something up to adding something that helps me attend to my relationship with God. Mainly, because I just don't think Lent is about telling myself I can't have cake until Easter. In the end, I got too distracted by the cake and not distracted enough by Jesus. So, here we are.

Someone once said that Lent is not about what we give up, but what we live for. Our spiritual practice is about tuning into our relationship with God and with one another. It is about paying attention to the story of our faith and letting it infuse the very nature of

our lives. Sometimes it takes us lying in the dust of death to realize what our lives are really about.

Even though Lent comes around every year it seems to me that this season feels particularly heavy. What is going on with this world? God, can you tell us because I'm really asking this time. Political tensions are rising, anxiety about the corona virus pandemic is climbing, stocks are crashing, we are just trying to be brave enough to get out of bed in the morning and go about our day – and now God is calling us into the wilderness?? This might feel like an exhausting request if we don't fully understand what happens in wildernesses.

I came across a poem this past week by artist, author, and United Methodist Minister Jan Richardson. I found it to be helpful in illuminating the nature of wilderness. I drank up the words of this river in the desert. The desert of feeling that sometimes in our world it seems as if there is only wilderness upon wilderness. It's called *Where the Breath Begins*. I'll share it with you now:

Where the Breath Begins<sup>1</sup>

Dry  
and dry  
and dry  
in each direction.

Dust dry.  
Desert dry.  
Bone dry.

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<sup>1</sup> © Jan Richardson. janrichardson.com.

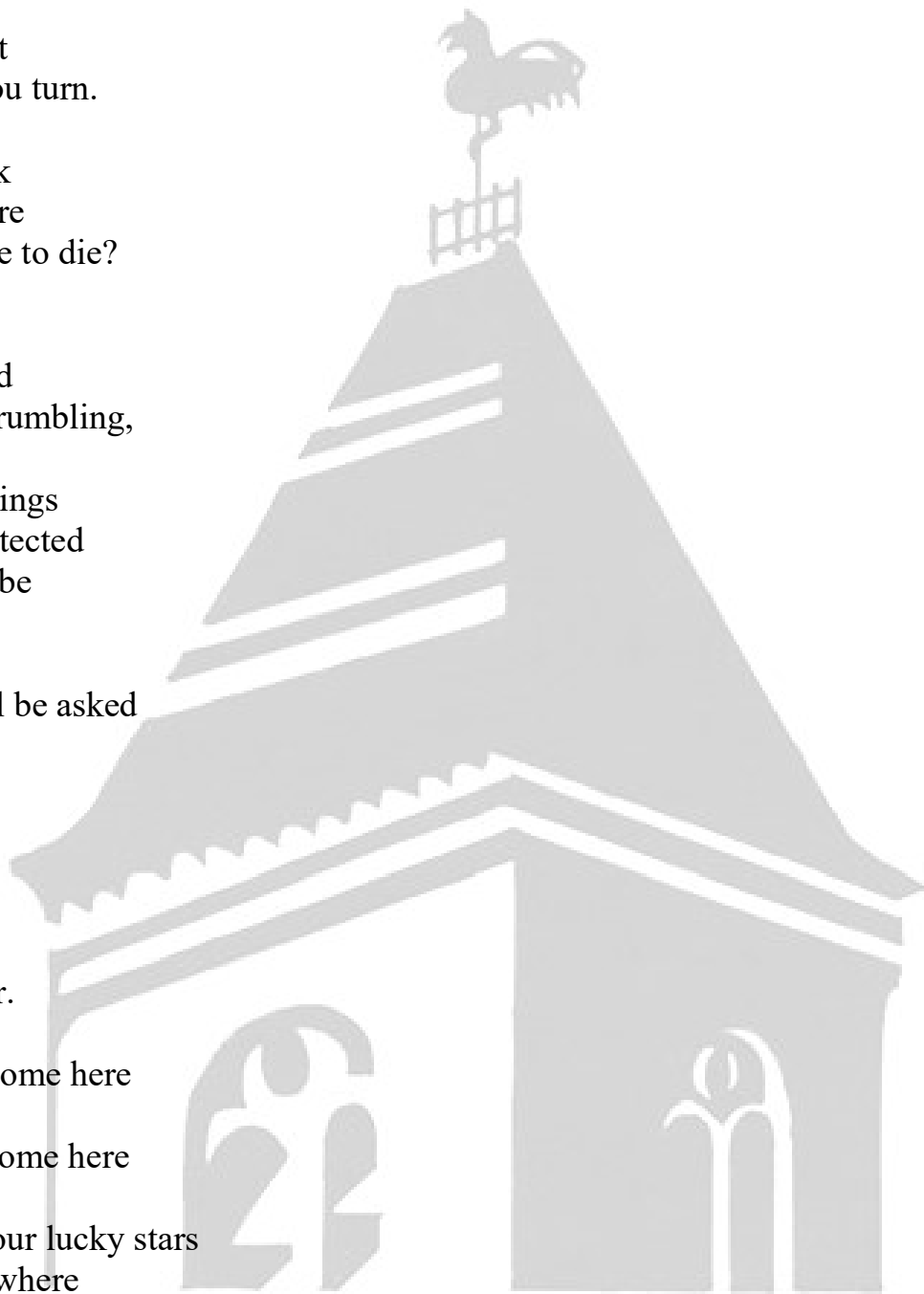
And here  
in your own heart:  
dry,  
the center of your chest  
a bare valley  
stretching out  
every way you turn.

Did you think  
this was where  
you had come to die?

It's true that  
you may need  
to do some crumbling,  
yes.  
That some things  
you have protected  
may want to be  
laid bare,  
yes.  
That you will be asked  
to let go  
and let go,  
yes.

But listen.  
This is what  
a desert is for.

If you have come here  
desolate,  
if you have come here  
deflated,  
then thank your lucky stars  
the desert is where  
you have landed—  
here where it is hard  
to hide,  
here where it is unwise



to rely on your own devices,  
here where you will  
have to look  
and look again  
and look close  
to find what refreshment waits  
to reveal itself to you.

I tell you,  
though it may be hard  
to see it now,  
this is where  
your greatest blessing  
will find you.

I tell you,  
this is where  
you will receive  
your life again.

I tell you,  
this is where  
the breath begins.

There is a difference between going into the wilderness with God and going into the wilderness alone. Where does our greatest blessing find us? Where does the breath of life begin? In the wilderness. Without wilderness, without doing the work of laying ourselves bare, without having the courage to let go of the things that no longer serve us we leave the chance to receive our lives again on the table.

In this season of Lent, we are attending to the ways in which God clears a path for us through the wilderness, how God seems to make a way out of no way. To understand

more fully what is being asked of us, let's look at our passage for this morning from the gospel of Matthew.

This text most often called "The Temptation of Jesus" comes directly after Jesus' baptism and marks the beginning of Jesus' formal ministry in the world. We are told that Jesus is led into the desert for 40 days and 40 nights and at the end of his fast he was famished. It is important to note that he wasn't in the wilderness for exactly 40 days, but it was exactly enough time for him to become uncomfortable. At the exact point when his discomfort is unbearable the devil confronts him.

This figure the devil is hard not to personify in your mind as you hear this story. The three words used in this passage "tempter," "devil," and "Satan" are referring to the same thing, which is more accurately designated as "an adversary or an accuser." We all work against adversaries in our own lives, and more often than not, the adversary we wrestle with the most lies within ourselves. One way to wrestle with this passage is to draw a connection between the things that tempt us in our lives with temptations that Jesus overcomes in this exchange. I think that this comparison is ignoring what is at stake in this conversation between Jesus and these ideas that are putting him to the test. The question is not will Jesus resist temptation, but what is Jesus being tempted with and how does he navigate the challenge?

The adversary challenges Jesus three times, tempting him with another reality in which he doesn't have full trust in God. When the adversary says to him, "If you are the

Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread.” Jesus responds, “It is written, ‘One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.’” When Jesus says this, he is remembering the story of his own people in the wilderness when God provided manna for them to eat. In fact, for each response he gives the adversary, he is remembering another story of his people’s past through quoting a portion of his scripture and doing something different with it. He remembers the times that they tested God and the times they worshiped other Gods and turned away from what is right entirely. I can imagine in some respects it must have caused Jesus some pain to remember the ways in which his ancestors turned away from God and turned towards self-preservation and fear. But in remembering the past, he was able to choose a way forward that made it possible for him to answer God’s call to accept his commission in the world as God’s chosen one. Jesus didn’t move on from the past of his people, but he moved forward with it and ultimately his response to grief made a way for God to do a new thing for the world with his life.

Last summer I watched a Ted talk about the nature of grief that changed the way I think about life after loss. The speaker was Nora McInery. She tells the story of how in October of 2014, she lost her second pregnancy and her dad died of cancer shortly after. Then the next month in November her husband Aaron died from brain cancer. At one point, she flippantly jokes that she has checked the facts and says that the research will stun you because “everyone you love has a 100% chance of dying.” Her humor is a gift in

helping process the heavy topics she covers. If you are looking for a good laugh-cry this ted talk is for you. She's made a career out of talking about the losses and tragedies that other people have experienced. She says that she's trying to do what she can to help people feel more comfortable with the uncomfortable.

She speaks about the prevalence of the phrase "moving on" when it comes to talking about grief and loss and how inappropriate that phrase really is when speaking about tragedy.

She expresses that using the phrase "moving on" implies that her husband's life and death are just moments that she can leave in the past and that she probably should. She testifies that losses are still so present for us. We don't forget, and we don't move on. She has not moved on from her husband, but she has moved forward with him. She says that she didn't get a happy ending, but she got another chapter. She explains, "we don't look at the people around us experiencing the joys and wonders of this life and tell them to move on. What we experience is not a moment in time or a bone that will reset, but we've been touched by something chronic, something incurable. It's not fatal, but sometimes it feels like it could be. We need each other to remember that grief is a multitasking emotion; you will be grieving and able to love in the same year, week, or in the same breath."

To remember is to say that something matters, that it is so important that it is inextricably bound into the fabric of our existence. It is so painful to remember the things in our lives that we are still grieving.

There is a small part of us that wants to forget the difficult parts of our past and present, the losses that we've suffered, the terror of a warming planet, that Jesus was in the wilderness at all and that in the end we were the ones who crucified him. But the thing is --we can't forget-- because these memories are still operating in our present and if we forget them not only will we erase real human beings who have suffered and continue to suffer from oppression we will live our lives controlled by something we can't see or understand.

These are some of the primary concerns of Black Liberation Theologian, James Cone. In this season of Lent we will be reading his book, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, in which he explores the meaning of putting the lynching tree and the cross in conversation with one another. He believes, "that the cross placed alongside the lynching tree can help us see Jesus in America in a new light and thereby empower people who claim to follow him to take a stand against white supremacy and every kind of injustice."<sup>2</sup> By listening to this part of America's past we are actively remembering the violence we are still collectively grieving and is still operating in our present day.

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<sup>2</sup> (xix)



The act of consciously remembering holds power. Cone observes towards the end of his book that, “as a nation, we are in danger of forgetting our ugly lynching past.... Because Emmett Till was remembered, the civil rights movement was born. When we remember, we give voice to victims.”<sup>3</sup> Perhaps, we come closer to truly seeing one another in our listening and remembering and are better able to see violence in our present as a result.

Because I have the kind of body I have I can’t speak of the black experience in America because that is not my story to tell, nor will I ever know that reality. To be honest, I feel paralyzed and feel a lot of fear in speaking about it at all. I want to keep silent because how can I say something about things that are unspeakable? But another thing I can’t do is keep silent about needing to deeply listen to another’s experience, I can’t be silent about needing to ask the hard questions of myself and others, to admit to my mistakes, to assume I will make mistakes, to roll up my sleeves and do the work of educating myself, and ultimately to not turn away from the terror of the lynching tree and the cross. What I do know is that all of our pasts are fundamentally intertwined, and that violence affects the souls of everyone involved even if in different ways. Cone asserts that “what happened to blacks also happened to whites.... we are bound together in America by faith and tragedy.”<sup>4</sup> We have a long way to go in grappling with this topic. In

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<sup>3</sup> (165)

<sup>4</sup> ibid

many ways we are just beginning. It's messy and it continues to be complicated...and because of this, we must not forget.

In Lent, we are called to make some decisions about whom we are ultimately serving and what we are ultimately called to do. This is hard work and must be done with the support of community. Whatever you choose to confront this season whether it is violence in our county or something from your personal past or present, also commit to something that fills your cup overflowing, that feeds your soul, that helps you find rest--whether that is signing up for a prayer partner, a house church, going to a bible study, or simply practicing compassion for yourself in not feeling guilty for bingeing Netflix.

We will soon hear Jesus' words in the communion liturgy, "Whenever you gather to eat and drink, remember me." Even in our grief Christ is still present for us and we remember not only him, but those who were crucified and who are still being crucified by oppressive systems and state sanctioned violence of every kind. In our taking of the bread, we know that we do not live by bread alone; and in our remembering we make space for God.

When it comes to the effects of violence in America, in the words of Nora's Ted talk, "we've been touched by something chronic, something incurable. It's not fatal, but sometimes it feels like it could be." We can't move on from the violence because it still affects our present, but in being able to love and to grieve in the same breath, we exist within the bounds of time and move forward together as we listen to each other as

siblings of faith and have hope that God will do a new thing in and through us in the midst of our wrestling.

The desert is not where we have come to die, but it is where we have come to start the journey to receive our lives anew. As our opening hymn Gracious Powers declares, “we shall remember all the days we lived through and our whole life shall then be yours alone.” This is what the desert is for: to hunger, to thirst, to remember, to grieve and to love, and to surrender to God, the one who will make a way out of no way, for us all.

Amen.

