

Scripture Readings:

Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16

Mark 8:31-38

Grace From the Ashes

God made a covenant with Abraham and Sarah that stretches right into our lives. We are products of this covenant and embrace its blessings when we acknowledge that we are called and named by The most Holy. This covenantal promise reminds us that anything is possible with God. It reminds us that God is with and for us, and will lift us up even when we think it is beyond possible. God will be there and desires to create something more with and through that covenant even if we don't believe it. Even if like Abraham we fall on our face and laugh at God's claim on our life. And yet, to be in covenant with means to be in relationship with. To be in covenant with requires work and responsibility. Just ask Abraham and Sarah and the prophets of old, better yet ask the disciples.

Gary Patterson points out in his lenten blog *Longing for Home* "this week's gospel reading is a tough one, but you already knew that the journey wouldn't be easy. Halfway through Mark's gospel, Jesus drops a bombshell, "The Son of Man must undergo great suffering...." And, that if this is true for him, then it's going to be true for his disciples: "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves, take up their cross and follow me."

Peter jumps in right away, of course, "Say it isn't true, Jesus..." but Jesus pushes him abruptly aside, "Get behind me, Satan." You get the feeling that suffering is pretty central to what Jesus is about."¹

Jesus knows that we will and must rise from the ashes. God calls us to such a life.

"Accepting suffering is never going to be very popular, even with the most dedicated. Most of us, like Lucy from the Peanuts cartoon, would prefer to go from up to upper up. We turn to religion to be comforted, to be reassured. We want to know that if we play by the rules of the game, then we will win the prize. We lift up our prayers – needy, often selfish – asking for blessings, the good life. We're willing to do the right thing, say the proper words, engage in the approved rituals, even do the occasional good deed... in return, we hope for protection and prosperity.

But perhaps another part of us recognizes Jesus' honesty, as we acknowledge the suffering that flashes throughout the Bible – slavery in Egypt; lost in the wilderness; exile in Babylon; the voices of Job, Jeremiah, the Psalmist... the cross.

¹ Patterson, Gary, "Longing for Home" Lenten Blog 2015 UCC

We don't like to talk about suffering. And yet, we know that it is written into the very nature of this universe, where everything is constantly coming into being, then falling apart. Supernovae explode and galaxies collide; species emerge and become extinct, and only the fittest survive."²

We as human beings create suffering for ourselves, others and our world all the time, and yet we will do almost anything to avoid it, acknowledge it or address it. Human beings are capable of horrific evil (just watch a few minutes of the news any day of the week). And yet, we try to avoid the reality of suffering. This avoidance was really clear to me this week when "what colour is that dress" became the crisis of our social world. I watched one reporter ask the question "Do you not think this is avoidance of suffering and reality in a world full of crisis, massacre and terrorism." She was quickly shot down by her co-anchors who told her this is shattering their reality. (If you don't know this story you can ask someone later and you will quickly find someone who knows the story).

The journey of life we face can be harder than we might ever imagine and yet we are invited into the way of love. We are invited even to carry our cross in the trials of life and offer hope unseen.

A few weeks back at the C21 conference I met a person who lives this message more than anyone I have ever known. His story, life and presentation taught and impacted us in ways we dare not forget. Dieter Zander was a popular pastor, sought after speaker, musician and author. He was on the top of the game. Everyone went to Dieter to learn, listen and experience more of God. He said he was a star in his world - A Rockstar! And then life happened. I am going to invite you to watch his video because I am not qualified to share his story. Here is a man who has a cross to bare, and has chosen to let Grace carry him out of the ashes. (I will read along with the text on the screen). A Stroke of Grace.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uwCL_XJGaOQ

When Dieter shared his story at the conference he told of a time when he heard from God in a moment of wrestle and despair. You see Dieter thought he was called to be a rock star, a popular performer, worker, pleaser. He said "I used to be a rockstar, a super sheep, now I am just a sheep." And yet he heard from God in moments of dark grace. "I love your naked you! I'm inviting you to play with me, come home." God began teaching Dieter in his inner life that everything is holy. Dieter feels that God is transforming his soul, spirit, mind and body from super sheep/pastor to saint. Dieter has come to see that the work he does moving spoiled goods into carts is feeding the hungry and caring for those in need. He is following God's saintly call. He ended with I am a janitor - but I am a powerful janitor.

Each one of us will suffer, every one of us pastors and musicians in that room on that day knew we could be Dieter. We want to believe that if we just box up our faith in the perfect compartment and vehicle we will not suffer and yet life and faith do not work like that, and Jesus never said they would.

² Patterson Gary, "Longing for Home" Lenten Blog 2015 UCC

We may not like to hear from Jesus - the comforter that life may be hard, and we will have crosses to bare, but Jesus desires for us to live a full life and that means honesty. Gary continues “without honesty, without a full recognition of suffering, loss, death, and sin – well, we risk living an illusion. Jesus says, we need to acknowledge and even embrace the reality of suffering. We must go through it, and trust that there is a different kind of living on the other side... because, “On the third day,” says Jesus, “the Son of Man will rise again;” and further, that those who follow him, will find their lives, their truest selves. (*Just ask Dieter*) The Jesus way is to let go, to be vulnerable, to refuse to let fear and suffering control our lives. We are invited into the way of discipleship, which is the way of costly love, of self-sacrifice, which is the only way to discover life in all its fullness.

And this is true despite all common sense appearances to the contrary, because God is always part of the equation; there is a love at work within the world that continues to create and re-create, that will bring forth new life.”³

Grace will rise from the ashes.

Amen.

³ IBID