

Lent 2, Year B
The Rev. Catherine L. Tatem
The Church of the Redeemer, Greenville, SC
February 25, 2024

Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16 Psalm 22:22-30 Romans 4:13-25 Mark 8:31-38

Division and animosity flourish throughout the world. We can neither listen to nor read the news to hear about hatred toward others. With that background, Paul's declaration of God's radical righteousness of all humanity in Paul's letter to the Romans is tough to envision, let alone to embrace. Author Doug Bratt (<https://cepreaching.org/commentary/2024-02-19/14429/>) writes that this "startling unity doesn't just provoke wonder. It may also make even Jesus' most faithful friends question how we can manifest such unity in a world and culture that might not recognize [unity] even if it bit us on the leg. We can't even come together enough to agree on what unity is or what it is that unites us."

That's a grim indictment of who we think we are. We think that we are warm, inviting Christians, and in many ways we are. At the same time, I, too, scoff at the candidates in almost all political commercials, cannot fathom seeing Jesus in incessant telemarketers, and walk away from multitudes of divisions beyond my comprehension and cure, thereby throwing myself into our fractured disunity. Paul's claim of God's righteousness in/toward all humanity, however, is at least as deep as our modern divisions. Unity in God, Paul conveys, is beyond the bounds of biology and of faith. Paul's writing leans us toward acknowledging circumcision as it is, the symbol of God's covenant with Abraham and not the determinate of God's favor. In this expansive view, considering that in God's creation there is light before there is a sun and a moon, it is not a stretch to realize that we are all descendants of Abraham through God and not because of our DNA or our beliefs. From Paul's words in verse 16: "Abraham is the father of us all." Neither are we righteous – "right with God/God's beloved" –by what we do, which in this letter, circumcision), but by our faithfulness in God.

This letter might make keeping Lenten disciplines seem somewhat irrelevant. God loves us anyway, right? Yes, God does love us "anyway," and "in spite of," and always. God also yearns to be in relationship with us, to join with God in bringing God's kingdom to life in this world. "God's will be done on earth as it is in heaven" is what we pray, and so the full task of our faith is to carry out God's will with and for every person in the world. Those things that we give up or take on during the 40 days of Lent orient us toward God, and that turning is not a small thing. Imagine if our Lenten practices changed us for longer than this season. That's part of the point. Looking at our finite nature might help us cling to that which is larger than ourselves, to help us see that our divisions are far outdone by the God of our very creation, who loves far beyond our bounds of thought and even of our earthly life.

Keeping our Lenten disciplines and, critically, helping others to keep theirs, is a source of strengthening our faith and of unity for those of us – and that's all of us – on the way to the cross with Jesus. We strengthen our faith, not because we gave up Snickers bars and eat M&Ms instead, but that we give up some treat and when we remember what we have given up, we thank God for the abundance that allows us to have such choices. When deny ourselves of pervasive indulgences, we practice obedience to our faith journey. We might remember our mortality, ashes to ashes, dust to dust, and over the course of our lives, remember that we all come from and return to that same dust. The things that divide us come out

of finite beings; it is God who finds righteousness that lasts any longer than our lives, who has the ability to love what comes from dust or even from the mystery that we call primordial chaos. Maybe some of these realizations will bring us the humility that we are, in fact, the tiniest of beings who are created and survive by love far beyond ourselves. Our practice of turning to God in particular ways in this season is meant to make a difference in our lives. We arrive to new life changed from who we were on Ash Wednesday, changed by our recognition of finitude and being “not God.”

One of the gifts in the church, God’s body of the faithful, is that we do not make our faith and life journeys alone. We are together, and together we will arrive at the cross. Together we see our complicitness in trying to kill a threat to the Empire, a threat to power. Together we come to a dawn in which our banding together in hatred is conquered by life.

We remember that God didn’t starting bringing people back to life when God resurrected Jesus. God didn’t begin with the young boy in 1 Kings (17.17-24), brought back to life by God through Elijah. God brings new life to Abraham, whose body was “as good as dead,” and to Sarah, whose womb was barren/dead (*nekrosin*). God brings life to the living, to the dead, and to a formless void in a beginning of this earth’s creation. What, this Lent, in practicing our faith, will God bring back to life in you?

Last week I said that one of the toughest things to give up for Lent is the thought that God forgets us or ignores our pleas. In our “week 2 of Lent” view, our difficult realization might be that we have no idea how God works. That’s what Peter discovered. Peter’s rebuke of Jesus was about Peter’s expectation of what a Messiah is and does. In saying that Jesus is the Messiah was to say that Jesus is the one who will save all of Israel. Jesus was the living, breathing hope of Israel. What are we to think and to do when the hope of the nation, the expected conquerer, says: “I am going to suffer and be rejected and be killed.” What kind of a Messiah says that?!

The kind of Messiah who says that difficult truth is the same one who says we must pick up our cross, and along with Peter, get behind Jesus. A rabbi’s students walk behind their teacher. We walk behind our Christ, to take this walk with him and, as Jesus instructs, to carry our own cross. In the Roman Empire, carrying one’s cross was a humiliating path to death because of our disobedience, our lack of conforming, to the powers of that world. Jesus’ cross holds the mystery that death does not and will not have the final word, nor does any person or empire have that power, then or now. Jesus’ cross turns our world upside down. That cross is one of life and we are on a walk to victory. The road might be long; the journey painful and heavy. There may be no clear road ahead as we forge a new path with a faith that says and one day knows, that God is present, that God does indeed love us that much, that God is alive and active in this world, even toward us, ashes to ashes, dust to dust.

We walk together, asking one another, how are you living Lent? How are we living into the unity of God declaring each one of “us,” and “them” righteous? It is tempting to think that our practices, our faithfulness in Christ don’t make much of a difference, but moving one rock changes the course of a river. Small, insignificant, unnamed people carry out God’s will and bring God’s word to us. We have God’s gift of life and of righteousness. Together, let’s practice a holy Lent. Repent of our failures, give of and beyond ourselves, encourage one another, and love one another all the way to the cross.

Join again, each day, a holy Lent. Arrive in God’s righteousness, to the place of new life. Amen.