

LENT 2, BREACH THEME
GENESIS 15 AND 17, ABRAHAM AND SARAH
February 25, 2018

I'm going to begin by complaining.

Not a very lofty way to begin, I know, but there it is. For those of you who have given up complaining for Lent I apologize ahead of time. (The good thing about that is that you won't complain about my complaining!)

Ok here's my complaint.

It's about the use of the word "religion"

It's a *good* word. A *strong* word. A word that says what it means. And somehow.... somehow we've lost that.

It's used these days as a ...slam....don't you find? When people use the word religion they don't often mean something good.

"Whatever you do don't talk religion or politics"

"Don't get all religious" and the now infamous *"I'm not religious I'm spiritual"*

When people say that I often ask what they mean by that...what they mean by this religious that they are not.

Most often the answer is that religion means....judgement, and rigidity, and rules. And a set of beliefs to which a person must blindly give assent. And an emotional crutch. Many times people will add "some people need that sort of thing but I don't"

That last expression is usually said with the implication, it always seems to me, that those who choose to go it alone, those who don't "need" a community and the form or institution that goes along with community, that somehow they are stronger, better, more spiritually advanced, and that those of us who choose to, or need to come together with others in their spiritual journeys are somehow weaker for that need. *"You can go to church if you need to; I don't need to go to church to be a Christian."* Does it seem that way to you?

And this week, I was reading the blog of one of my favourite authors who is in the process of her next book, set in a monastery. She says, *"This book isn't about religion. It's about belief."*

Now, I THINK she meant by that (I've emailed her to ask, no response yet) I think she means that it's not about a specific denomination or institution. I get that. But....

I wish we could reclaim that word for what it really means.

Literally it means

reconnecting. Re-Ligio...."Ligaments" join things. To re-ligeo is to rejoin, to reconnect, to bring together something that has been disconnected. It's about wholeness.

I like that a lot. Religion at its core, (whatever else our brokenness has made of it,) at its core it is a reaching out for connecting and for unity; individuals and communities and the world. And anything or any group or institution that does not have that at its goal, whatever else it is, is not religion.

We've chosen as the them image and concept for this season...we've chosen the heart. The season began with Ash Wednesday, when one of the readings was from the prophet Joel:

"Even now. says God, return to me with all your heart"

and Psalm 51: "Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me"

and from Matthew 6: "For where your treasure lies, there will your heart be also"

And through the season we'll read about a series of covenants where God, like a lover, offers her heart to us...I'll be your God and you be my people, he says over and over and over....a Biblical valentine

And finally on the Sunday just before Palm Sunday, we'll hear Jeremiah say that one day we won't need any of this written down. We won't need rules and scrolls and books and studies because we'll know. We'll know God. We'll know because it will be written - where? On our hearts. We'll know love by heart.

Sothe theme sort of begged to be lifted up.

As a worship committee as we began working with the theme we discovered that in the Hebrew culture and language, "the Heart" means the wholeness of a person.

In our culture and language, we say "the heart" and we mean the emotions. And we play that off against the head. "Do you lead with your head or your heart?" Like that.

But for the Hebrew culture, the heart is the seat of the will. The centre of the intellect. The place of emotions. All of that together. Our minds. Our wills, Our emotions.

All of that together is the heart of a person.

The centre, the essence, the core of a human being. The heart.

What I invite you to do this Lenten season is...

to let your heart be touched and changed and formed by this sacred story. Formed and reformed by what we know about Jesus; not only his death, but his life.

To expose yourself to this story, to let it form and reform you, is the work of a lifetime. To exercise your heart...to strengthen your faith, build and tear down and rebuild your beliefs, your endurance, and your tolerance for ambiguity and the unexpected....this takes work.

It's like working out physically, If you're in shape, if you work at your strength and endurance, your cardio capacity and all that stuff...then when you get sick or have an accident, you have a better chance of healing quickly.

Same for spiritual things. If you don't ever do any study, ask the hard questions, develop any spiritual practice...if you don't work at it, then when the time comes when something happens and you're crushed; your heart is broken.....you don't have the stamina, the tools, the core strength, the habits of the heart that will keep you stable, help you heal and endure.

I'm asking you to start today. Or continue, today. To work with these texts and let them get into you, with all their quirks and questions....let these texts strengthen your heart. Build up your endurance and stamina spiritually, so that when the inevitable Lenten things happen, and they will....temptation, fear, the betrayal of a friend, the experience of feeling abandoned by God....when those things happen, when your heart is broken, you'll have a chance. Let these texts form and reform you this season.

I invite you, as it were, to cross your heart.

Last week's reading took us to the story of Noah and the rainbow covenant God made with the earth. (another great word, covenant...co- together ven – coming. Coming together. Covenant.)

Care bears and unicorns notwithstanding, the rainbow story is not a fluffy feel good tale for children: it is essentially a religious and political manifesto for people who are tempted to say that this world, or some parts of it, are beyond redemption; not worth the trouble; outside the care of God. God places the rainbow in the sky, Genesis says, and says “ I make my covenant with all flesh”. Says that 7 times in that reading....

The rainbow, joining heaven and earth in a visual sign: a promise: a covenant, bringing together heaven and earth. Forever.

And today, following the movement of scripture, we move on now, to another covenant.

Here's the back story: In a city called Ur, or Haran, in the Babylonian Empire (where the people of Israel had been taken as captives, likely before this was written) In a city called Ur live a man, Abram, and a woman, Sarai. God calls them....let's read it. Chapter 12.

read 12: 1-6

Abraham is 75. We don't hear how old Sarai is, but she, we'll find out later, is well beyond child bearing. They are childless. They hear a promise that God will make of them a great nation. Absurd. Laughable. What are they going to do?

They leave. They hear a voice and they follow, on the strength of a promise and a voice in the night.
They leave.

Listen again to chapter 15 as it continues the story

read 15: 1-5

Their journey must have been hard. I've not travelled in the desert butI know it is both beautiful and harsh. I picture them, at night, lying under the stars or under a flap of animal skin...wondering if they had been mistaken. Perhaps frightened, what animals lurked in darkness – who knew? And wondering, as you DO when you're outside like that...

when you have the gift of being where you can actually see..looking up at the stars, as you do when you have the opportunity to do that without light pollution. We pay dearly for our cities and towns, don't we? When we get a chance to be out in the complete darkness, the stars so close you could touch them....

It takes your breath away. And at that moment, the electricity and the convenience of living in town seems a small, ungenerous consolation. those stars must have been beath-taking.

I picture A and S in that spiritual place. Feeling a bit silly for having followed what they thought was a voice and may have turned out to be just thunder or a dream.

There they are, outside, feeling foolish....and then God, in that way God has, , says “*Come on outside with me. Let's sit on the back porch*” I picture it, God's arm around Abe's hunched, frail shoulders, the old man chilly in the night air, and God says “*Look up*”

They do..

It doesn't help. It's so far....they're beautiful, the vast, inverted bowl of a sky, dark blue almost to blackness and the stars, polished and gleaming....what does that have to do with me they think? The sky so lovely andI'm just....maybe I'm losing it...just a misguided sad old person on a fool's journey.

Count them. The voice is soft in their ear.

Count them if you can.

Count them? They start...they can find the constellations, so familiar....there's Orion, and the big dipper....those are well known...the first ones you teach your little ones. If you have little ones to teach, Sarah thinks... but the more she looks the more she finds. Once your eyes adjust you see not only the obvious bright ones but tiny, blinking, little ones, the sky is dense with them. More and more....And then one will fall, sailing across the sky and she loses count and....

count them? Impossible.

“*So many*” the voice says, “*So many will your descendants be*”

And suddenly the sky is no longer a thing of distant beauty reminding them of their own inconsequence but rather
a sign of the promise
of their oneness with it all

and somehow a ... The stars are no longer only there but here; in their heart, in their eyes. In them.

And that was how the story went. For years, it was told around campfires, whispered into the ears of sleepy children, sung and recited on long journeys to pass the time...formed and reformed generations of people who knew themselves to be called to a journey by a Holy God. This story like all good stories, found and formed a people. Told them who they were. To whom their hearts belonged. Their place in the universe.

Years later, they found themselves in captivity. Their country had been demolished, God had not kept the promise as they understood it. They were in exile, their hearts broken. Shaken in every way.

And as we do when we're traumatized, they questioned their identity, they questioned their beliefs, they questioned one another. Who ARE we then? You do that when something horrible has happened. Who am I NOW?

And, like any good pastor, a priest among them tells them the story. Retells the story of A and S but, like all good stories, it's told for a purpose and to bless and form the ears of those who hear it.

The priest tells it again.

17: 1-12

We are still God's people

And even though everything has changed and we are no longer the people we thought we were

And God is not the God we thought we knew

Even though the heavens fail us

Even though we think it's too late now, we're too old, too much water under the bridge....even though you want to just not try any more

Even now, even so

We are still God's people

And we are marked by that covenant in our very hearts. Marked in our flesh in the most intimate of ways.

To remind us every single day, as our bodies do what they are designed to do

Remind us regularly and intimately

That's who we are and that's who we'll always be.

No matter what else is in question.

The scriptures cut to the heart of us, as it were.

Whoever has an impression that the Bible and matters of faith are kind of ethereal and fluffy and nice Spiritual in a non-earthly way....

I seriously don't know where they've been doing BS, but this is as earthy as it gets.

As the scriptures don't allow for the separation of the intellect and the will and the emotions, but combine them into one word "heart"

So they don't allow the separation of body and spirit.

To be God's people means we're all in

With our whole heart. Body, mind, spirit – it's all one.

And that leads directly to the Gospel text.

READ IT

Up to now, Jesus has been teaching and healing and moving from town to town
NOW they're about to go to Jerusalem. He knows what will happen there. They don't but he does.
He says, in effect...

It's getting real now. If you don't think you can do this, if you want to leave....now is the time to decide.
Because this is not a game, this is going to require everything you've got.

He tells them to take up their cross....and for at least some of them, that would become literally true.
Crucifixion wasn't new....J wasn't the first. They'd all have seen, up close, people crucified. The
Romans used it as a way of terrorizing people who were thinking of opposing them. It was done
publically....they knew what that meant.

And here's the promise.

READ IT

We're not marked in our flesh, well not all of us, but we're marked at our baptism – a cross on our
foreheads, marking us for love. Costly love Marking us not with a smiley face, but a cross.

We are people who know

Know

In our hearts

Who know

That the shape of life is cruciform. That there is pain and risk and to really live you have to stand for
something

And kneel for something

And it possibly, probably, will cost you dearly.

And we know

That whatever painful place we'll be called to go

Whatever price we'll need to pay

For the Gospel: for integrity, for authenticity, for living faithfully in a world of God's making

We know in our hearts what whatever the cost, it will be worth it

Because....

Our life is on the line.

Not only ours, but the life of the world.

Our decisions are costly and often painful

The alternative?

REREAD

To individuals facing personal tragedies or difficult ethical decisions

To leaders in business and government and other places of power facing hard decisions about values and priorities

To churches coming to the realization that it's highly unlikely that there is a generation coming after us to keep up what we now know as the church

To anyone who thinks "It's over then...." "I'm too old to try....too old to change....it's too late for me...."

I offer these texts which say

I beg to differ.

Lurking in these ancient words we find the God of the possible impossibility;

One who can bring life out of the places where we thought no life could be

A child from the womb of a woman well past her day

Descendants as many as the stars in the sky from the loins of a 99 year old man, for whom the twinkle in his eye is a distant memory

It wasn't over for them

And it's not over for you.

It's not over for the Gospel

And it's not over for this world

With a God like this

None of us is past our day

And the future is as open as the sacramental sky

As close to us as breathing

Let's walk in hope

In a way that embodies the oneness to which we've been called