

“Lent for the Rest of Us”

Rev. David Gregory

March 10, 2019

First Sunday in Lent

First reading

Morning Poem by Mary Oliver

Every morning
the world
is created.
Under the orange
sticks of the sun
the heaped
ashes of the night
turn into leaves again
and fasten themselves to the high branches—
and the ponds appear
like black cloth
on which are painted islands
of summer lilies.
If it is your nature
to be happy
you will swim away along the soft trails
for hours, your imagination
alighting everywhere.
And if your spirit
carries within it
the thorn
that is heavier than lead—
if it’s all you can do
to keep on trudging—
there is still
somewhere deep within you
a beast shouting that the earth
is exactly what it wanted—
each pond with its blazing lilies
is a prayer heard and answered
lavishly,
every morning,
whether or not
you have ever dared to be happy,
whether or not
you have ever dared to pray.



Second reading

from *The Universal Christ* by Richard Rohr

Faith at its essential core is accepting that you are accepted! We cannot deeply know ourselves without also knowing the One who made us, and we cannot fully accept ourselves without accepting God's radical acceptance of every part of us. And God's impossible acceptance of ourselves is easier to grasp if we first recognize it in the perfect unity of the human Jesus with the divine Christ. Start with Jesus, continue with yourself and finally expand to everything To end in grace you must somehow start with grace, and then it is grace all the way through.

Welcome to the waiting room. Whether we realize it or not, this past week we have entered one. It started on Wednesday and it will last for forty days (not counting Sundays)—days of introspection and self-examination, modeled after the forty days that Jesus spent in the wilderness fasting and being tempted—a time of test and trial before the beginning of his public ministry. It was the time in between. It was the waiting area between the first three decades of his life—a time about which we know so little with any certainty—and the three years of his public ministry which we know a few things about. This wilderness was something to be endured, a time to get through. A time of testing one had to pass in order to move on to the next thing.

The number forty is significant in the Hebrew scripture as well. In the flood of Noah, the rains came for forty days and forty nights, destroying the world that was, while the world that was to be was still unknown. And an entire race of people called Israelites, having escaped slavery in Egypt, wandered in the wilderness for forty years before their children and grandchildren were finally able to enter the Promised land.

We've been tempted to think that a wilderness is a bad thing, but it's not. It is simply a "liminal space." The word "liminal" is from a Latin word meaning "threshold." Life is full of such spaces. A semester of school is one of those liminal spaces between matriculation and graduation. Being engaged to be married is a liminal space, as is pregnancy. A time of illness can be a liminal space, another kind of waiting area. We move in and out of these waiting rooms all the time. And for people who are spiritually awake and aware, liminal spaces are vital for knowing ourselves and the divine within us more deeply.

Reformations, like the one we're in right now are liminal spaces when the attics and basements of religious and spiritual traditions are purged of all that is no longer needed, allowing new structures and experiences to take place. Let's call it spring cleaning: time for new furnaces and new roofs, some new paint for the walls and the replacing of some shabby chairs. There's a new art show on the wall. I'm growing my hair out. We have a new yoga program starting. Let's face it, we're in a season of change.

Prolific author Richard Rohr has suggested liminal spaces are where we

are betwixt and between the familiar and the completely unknown. There alone is our old world left behind, while we are not yet sure of the new existence. That's a good space where genuine newness can begin. Get there often, and stay as long as you can by whatever means possible.... This is the sacred space where the old world is able to fall apart, and a bigger world is revealed. If we don't encounter liminal space in our lives, we start idealizing normalcy. The threshold is God's waiting room. Here we are taught openness and patience as we come to expect an appointment with the divine Doctor.

In the Christian tradition there are two liminal spaces in the rhythm of the calendar. One is the season of Advent, the waiting area for the birth of the Christ-Child. It encompasses the nourishing darkness of the womb enshrined in the Winter Solstice. The other waiting area is called Lent, from an old Anglo word meaning “spring,” and includes the Vernal Equinox, or the awakening of spring, enshrined in the idea of resurrection celebrated this year in the latter part of April. The great thing about these rhythms of the calendar is that they keep us from “idealizing normalcy.” They make us adaptable to change. And the day we stop being adaptable to change is the day we put a lock on our doors and close up shop.

Here are the questions we should ask right now. How am *I* changing? How are *WE* changing? If I’m breathing, I’m changing. If my heart keeps beating another 365 days, I’ll not be the same person I am now. Tripp and I went from being New Yorkers to Left Coasters on a single day last February. This followed a two-year waiting period where we saw our world shifting in a radical way. We can hardly recognize ourselves as the same people. It was a sacred space in which our old world was able to fall apart and a bigger world was revealed. There are old worlds falling apart each and every day, and it is not always apparent what is being created. We find ourselves out of Egypt, but we haven’t quite found our promised land.

We have a sister congregation in the United Church of Christ, located in Guerneville. The church has been struggling for a number of years, but has served the community well by housing a food bank and as rental space for a number of community groups. During the last year, the Guerneville church has made a difficult but necessary decision to sell their building. They found a buyer and were moving toward a closing. And then came the rising waters of the Russian River, and everything changed. The food bank is gone. Most of the building is uninhabitable. The rental income is gone. They cannot pay their part-time pastor, even though she has determined she will not abandon them. For that congregation, the old world has fallen apart, and the bigger world has yet to be revealed. They are in a liminal space.

“Every morning the world is created,” says Mary Oliver. Perhaps she’s saying that every day can hold a waiting room.

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In this new day we have a high and holy calling, which is to deeply know ourselves. Richard Rohr says we cannot know ourselves without knowing the one who made us. The one who made us is within us. If we are going to know the perfect unity of the human and divine within us—what we have called incarnation—then we need a season of self-knowledge, and a willingness to step out of the routine, to stop idealizing normalcy and to embrace the threshold of something new.

Here at Community Congregational Church, we are on the threshold, in the liminal space. Call it the window of opportunity, a dissatisfaction with what is normal, a wilderness that takes us to a destination we know not of. I can guarantee you, the destination will be exactly right, even though in this moment we wouldn't even recognize it.

