

# Towson Presbyterian Church

## 3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday in Lent – March 4, 2018

Rev. Joel Strom

Psalm 19:1-9 and John 2:13-22

*“Crawling Into the Journey of Lent”*

This past Monday I took a few minutes and reflected on some of our past Sunday morning worship services, beginning in January. And as I reflected, I came to the conclusion that we have had some powerful services over the last two months. January began with Reaffirmation of the Baptismal Covenant, as we were invited to come forward and dip our hand in the waters of baptism and remember that God has called each of us by name, claims us, and clothed us in eternal love.

Two weeks later we experienced a Healing & Wholeness service, and we were invited to come forward again and name our desire for healing and wholeness, to receive the sign of the cross with oil on our forehead, and hear these words: *“May the Spirit of the living God, present with us now, enter your body, mind and soul and heal you of all that harms you.”*

Two Sunday’s ago Pastor Rob offered as his *Lenten Lament* sermon. It was incredibly courageous of him, and it was raw, and it was moving...oh was it moving. And last week our middle and high school youth led us in worship with passion, energy and wisdom. They shared their faith and their stories with us. Sunday mornings these last two months have been powerful at TPC.

And as I reflected this past week, it struck me that we are in the season of Lent, however, it doesn’t feel like the season of Lent, at least for me it doesn’t right now. This is partially due to the uniqueness of these last two Sundays – our first two Sundays of Lent - and I fully admit that I might just be preaching to myself here, but it feels like we have missed the beginning of Lent. We’re in Lent, as the church year tells us we are, but I’m not really in Lent. I wonder...have we missed the opportunity to fully enter into what can be a very transforming season, and to embrace and lean into all that it offers us, as we journey with God to Good Friday and Resurrection Sunday? Are you crawling into the season of Lent like I am?

Lent is most commonly associated with the story of Jesus’s 40 days of solitude in the wilderness. The wilderness, as it’s described in the Bible, is not a vacation. It’s *not* a 40-day hike where you are camping and enjoying God’s creation. It’s not fun. The wilderness in the Bible *is not* an experience that you willingly enter into. No one desires the wilderness – it’s lonely, it’s difficult and it’s challenging. The gospels describe the presence of Satan in the wilderness with Jesus, and Satan means *the One who opposes you or heaps accusations onto you*. Remove for a moment the

picture of the guy in a red suit with a pitchfork. The Satan is the one that whispers in our ears that we are not who God tells us that we are; it is that accusing voice that seeks to not build us up, but tear us down.

For Jesus, the wilderness *was not* an easy experience for him. I imagine it was one where he wrestled with questions of identity, and who God was calling him to be and to do. And sometimes we enter into the season of Lent and we are already in the wilderness. Life has already pushed us there. We are in the midst of a season that is difficult and we are searching for answers for help. Sometimes we enter Lent already in the wilderness.

But most of the time, we enter into Lent just like any old day or season of our life. Life for the most part is not crashing in around us. It's just February, and so to help us enter into this season, sometimes during Lent we give up something, like chocolate or television, as a way to remember Jesus's upcoming sacrifice. That's been my practice at times in the past, and it has been a way to mark this season as unique to any other.

But if we were to dig a little deeper into the intent of this season we'll discover that Lent is about what's going on inside each of us, and how we are currently in relationship with God. Traditionally, the central practices of Lent are self-examination and confession and repentance, and they have a way of nudging us into the wilderness, that place where we are a little uncomfortable.

In Lent we remember that God is most interested in, and cares most about, what is going on *inside of us*. The season of Lent is an invitation to ask ourselves how are we currently in relationship with God?

In John chapter 2 of our gospel reading, we find Jesus in the temple, and the temple was the primary place where a first-century Jew *expressed their relationship with God*. And from today's scripture, we can make the assumption from the actions he displays, that Jesus is not incredibly impressed with temple rituals, right? But at the same time, we could also say that he has a deep reverence for the temple as a religious and spiritual place. He cares about what it represents and what it's become.

Because unfortunately, the temple had become a marketplace. That wasn't the original intention, but that's what it had become. To be a good Jew, Jews had to make sacrifices at the temple, which means you had to buy animals for sacrificing. And you couldn't buy these animals with Roman coins; instead, you had to use Temple coins, which you purchased in the temple.

And while the system was corrupt and had lost its original intent, it also did a great job of keeping God outside of a person, and not on the inside. God was found *out there* in the act of

making sacrifices, but not *in here*, inside of a person. And so as long as you fulfilled your duty of getting to the temple and buying an animal and making sure it was properly sacrificed by the priest, you were good with God, and fulfilling your relationship with God.

But when we look at Jesus and his ministry, we discover that he invites us to be relationship with God in a whole new way. Jesus was taking religion and moving it from the outside, where sacrifices were needed, to the inside of each person, where a different kind of sacrifice was needed.

On Ash Wednesday, our entrance into Lent, we traditionally read from Matthew chapter 6, which is right in the middle of Jesus's Sermon on the Mount. And here Jesus says, when you practice your faith - when you serve, or pray, or fast, make sure you do it when no one is watching you. Make sure you're doing it for the right reasons. Jesus is more concerned about the interior of someone than their external actions.

If Lent is about what's going on inside of each of us, then the journey of Lent is about intentionally welcoming God into our lives. It's about asking God to enter in. And so if you are like me, and you are crawling on hands and knees into this season, we can still give up something. And we can still take on the traditional practices of Lent – self-examination, confession, repentance.

But what if we instead asked some different questions this year? What if we asked ourselves *where in my life do I need to welcome God in right now?* Where in my life am I struggling? Where in my life do I need help? Maybe, for you the question isn't where do I need help, but where in my life do I need to give thanks to God during this season of Lent?

What if we asked ourselves, where am I overwhelmed and I need to ask God for help? Where in my life is currently closed off to God? Not intentionally, but it is. God hasn't been welcomed in. What would it look like if your Lenten spiritual practice was to welcome God into *that part of your life?*

What if we took 30 seconds of silence, right now, and asked this question: *what part of my life might I welcome God into today?* Let's take 30 seconds and ask that question. Close your eyes, keep them open, whatever is comfortable for you. Let's be silent and let's see what rises to the surface. *Where can I welcome God in today?*

### ***Silence***

The journey of Lent is leading somewhere. It has a destination. It is leading to Good Friday, and then to Easter, Resurrection Sunday, where we discover new life. And new life is sometimes

extraordinary – its bells and whistles and life is never the same as we take a 180 degree turn and move in a whole new direction.

But most of the time, the new life that God brings in our life *is small*. It doesn't seem extraordinary. It is *not* a mountaintop experience. It's a small change. It's a step in a new direction. But it's still life-changing, because we have changed, and our relationship with God has changed.

Towson Presbyterian Church, the journey of Lent has begun, and it's leading us to resurrection and to new life.

Let's not miss it. Thanks be to God.