

*Mark 1:9-15 New Revised Standard Version*

In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him.

Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news."

*Genesis 9:8-17 New Revised Standard Version*

Then God said to Noah and to his sons with him, "As for me, I am establishing my covenant with you and your descendants after you, and with every living creature that is with you, the birds, the domestic animals, and every animal of the earth with you, as many as came out of the ark. I establish my covenant with you, that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of a flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth."

God said, "This is the sign of the covenant that I make between me and you and every living creature that is with you, for all future generations: I have set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth. When I bring clouds over the earth and the bow is seen in the clouds, I will remember my covenant that is between me and you and every living creature of all flesh; and the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all flesh. When the bow is in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that is on the earth." God said to Noah, "This is the sign of the covenant that I have established between me and all flesh that is on the earth."

Quite by accident, and serendipitous blessing,

Kathy and I happened to be in Galveston during Mardi Gras,  
and our hotel balcony happened to overlook the parade route.

It was a wonderful and delightful time for us to be there,  
and Mardi Gras definitely had an exuberant party atmosphere,  
**revelers out for a final fling before the austerity of Lent.**

So the party is over -- now it's Lent, time to restrain & get serious.

The fun, revelry and the wild times of Mardi Gras  
have come and gone -- that's it until Easter,

**and by a severe - austere - penitent season of Lent  
we can look forward to Easter's resurrection and joy.**

**Today, the first Sunday of Lent, so we're near the beginning  
of our spiritual journey walking with Jesus toward Easter.**

The 40 days of Lent are meant to parallel as a metaphor representing  
the 40 days Jesus spent in the wilderness after his baptism.

Yes, it would probably be more pleasant, convenient and easier  
if we could move right into the joyful celebration of Easter,  
and just skip the unpleasantness, messiness and despair  
of betrayal, arrest, abandonment, crucifixion & death.

**But that's not how it works,  
for if there is no death, then there can be no resurrection.**

Lent is our season to listen and seek to hear God's will and voice,  
for self-examination and exploration so to deepen our faith  
by letting go of destructive distractions, our fear and guilt...

**... and that's a task for which we do need to be diligent & attentive.**  
And anything else is to settle for significantly less

than the abundant grace and full blessings God intends.

Some Christian traditions focus on giving up pleasures for Lent,  
or focus on our human sin, failures, faults and short-comings,  
and on the terrible suffering and death that Jesus endured,  
**but that's not the whole story.**

I know that Lenten sermons are typically about sin, shame & guilt,  
filled with sorrow and grief, and with lots of sadness & regret  
and focused on the terror and fear of God's coming judgment,  
**but I can't seem to get past God's steadfast and gracious love.**

Yes, certainly it is appropriate to examine our faith and living,  
and for us to consider our sin & the terrible sufferings of Christ.  
**But it's also important not to lose sight of God's unending love  
and the Lord's promises that provide us with hope, peace & joy.**

And though it may not sound all that Lenten or penitent,  
truly each one of you are the Lord's own precious child,  
and you are indeed deeply and intimately loved by God.  
In fact, the Lord is very much pleased to have created you,  
Jesus does love you and is pleased with who you really are,  
and will help you fulfill the very best just as God intends.

So rather than a self-focused season of self-inflicted deprivation,  
and a Lent that emphasizes what we give up and turn away from,  
my emphasizes is what I am turning toward, **the blessings of God.**  
Yes do some **soul-searching**, but focus more on **God-searching**, and  
reflecting on amazing depth and nature of the Lord's love & mercy.

Biblical hope arises from our confidence in God and in God's love.  
It's our confident assurance that God is indeed gracious & good,  
and rightly celebrated by our walk with Jesus toward the cross.

Traditionally,  
Lent is a time of austerity, to strip away superficiality  
stepping back from life's consumption, clutter & clamor,  
a time to reflect on the life-road we're on – and consider if  
perhaps we're moving too fast & going in the wrong direction.

It's a great time to revitalize our faith and commitments, **which is  
sometimes compared to a journey into the desert wilderness of life.**

A focus on our wilderness experiences is a legitimate aspect of Lent,  
and often it's amid our most crushing disappointing defeats  
that we meet God in the most powerful and significant ways.

So to me, the important thing  
isn't that there are hard times of lonely deserted wilderness,  
or that there are times of difficult struggle and trial,  
or that our lives are less than God's good intention for us,  
**but the important thing, is that we are not alone at such times  
and that we are never rejected or abandoned to make it on our own.**

As difficult and unpleasant as our wilderness experiences can be,  
God does not waste the pain, troubles and struggles that we endure,  
but they can be places of ultimate value and great worth  
where faith is rekindled into trust, healing and hope,  
where we grow experiencing the graciousness of God.

Our wilderness experiences, our struggles and trials in life,  
are places of God's power, provision, promise and presence,  
are difficult, but most certainly not something to be wasted,  
but can be where we can grow Christian character & commitment,  
for as we are reminded and assured in Psalm 46:1 & 11  
God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble.  
The LORD of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge.

That promise of the Lord was and is fulfilled in the person of Christ,  
and how comforting and reassuring that Jesus can identify with us,  
because he's been there, he's been tempted & suffered as we do,  
and has personally struggled with wilderness testing, vs. 13,

He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the  
angels waited on him.

**Jesus was tested, to demonstrate his faithful obedience to God,  
for Satan wanted to trip him up and block his mission and ministry.**

**Jesus was not abandoned in his wilderness, and neither are we.**

Amid our seasons of hurt, loss and doubt, amid trial and injustice,  
God's presence comes into our brokenness bringing determined hope.

It is God's gracious love that **empowers us to endure and prevail**  
even the journey, trial and struggle of the wilderness testing.

God's empowering declaration & affirmation comes in vs. 11

And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

Lent is an appropriate season to reflect on our wilderness,  
so that we can emerge transformed, encouraged & hopeful,  
more mindful & faithful as we remember God's steadfast love,  
which means we emerge tried, strengthened and better equipped,

made more capable and eager for Easter joy & celebration  
more capable of fulfilling our call to serve & our mission

more capable of living a deeper more meaningful Christian life,

**so let's not waste our opportunity, our wilderness adventure of Lent.**

During this season of Lent,  
it is appropriate to self-examine our lives and how we're living,  
and consider our sin and failings, and the sufferings of Christ,  
**but never lose sight of God's love, his promises and our hope.**

So amid our soul-searching, **let's also do some God-searching,**  
and consider the depth and the nature of God's abiding love,  
always present with mercy such as in the Genesis 9 passage.

The storm-weathered ark is standing beaten and empty - abandoned.  
I imagine Noah and his family in a group huddled together  
stunned, looking wide-eyed out over the muddy destruction,  
a soggy, smelly, discouraging wasteland of death.

Seeing such overwhelming devastation, they've got to be thinking,  
"OK, now don't anybody do anything that might make God that mad again!"

The story of Noah is a story about God's broken-hurting-heart,  
of human sin so rampant and evil that it released a watery chaos,  
that so damages God's good and beautiful creation,  
and destroyed into becoming a tragic wasteland.

And so aware of their anxiety and fear of suffering another flood,  
God makes an unqualified covenant promise, that's **pure grace,**  
"I promise, never again, with no stipulations or demands,  
and not a word in the text about what Noah is expected to do.

This covenant with Noah's family and all of creation rests entirely  
upon God's steadfast faithfulness and unrestrained compassion  
that is promised to flow **regardless of human response**, vs. 11

Then God said ... "As for me, I am establishing my covenant... never again shall all flesh be cut off by the  
waters of a flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth."

And because of this unqualified and unrestrained, "never again",  
the story takes a radical turn away from judgment and wrath,  
**toward unlimited grace with no exclusions despite human sin.**

As we read earlier, vs. 9:12~16

God said, "This is the sign of the covenant that I make between me and you and every living creature that is with you, for all future generations:

I have set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth. ... I will remember my covenant that is between me and you and every living creature of all flesh; and the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all flesh.

The flood story is not really about what happens when God gets mad, but rather **it's a story of God's incredible grace, love & mercy.**

The rain came as a flood of judgment against human sin and depravity, but the sunlight shining through rain drops **transforms the storm into a beautiful rainbow,** just as we are transformed by Jesus, the Light of the world, when the grace of Jesus shines through us out into the world.

**So the rainbow is a forever-sign of God's love, grace and healing,** which means that we are not trying to earn or deserve God's favor rather, we're trying to respond to a gift, **that's already ours.**

It is not a self-confidence that we ourselves can defeat evil or that we can withstand the storm by our own will or strength, **but it is a certainty in God and in God's promises, and that** becomes the source of our power & strength, the truth and hope through which God calls us to live.

And that Christian hope is far more than just wishful thinking. It is not denying life's dangers, disappointments or fear, but it is built on the foundation of God's gracious love, **and absolute certainty that God is good, his promises are true...**

**... and because Jesus is Lord, the ultimate outcome is certain, our destiny in God and God's purpose is decided and assured, and not even death can separate us away from God's love.**

When we see that rainbow in the sky, it is a sign of God's love for us, which was the proclamation when God send his son Jesus, vs.14-15

Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news."

That brings us back to the purpose and point of the season of Lent, "repent, and believe in the good news."

The word, 'repent'  
literally, it means to change your mind and perspective,  
it is to turn back and change the direction of your life.

**Repent is not about an angry God who is waiting to squash us like bugs. Repent means to turn aside from our destructive direction in life, and instead turn toward something far better and joyful, to accept & receive God's good intention for our lives.**

When Jesus said, 'repent' and 'believe the good news'  
he was not talking about two different and separate things.

To repent is to believe and trust that the Good News is good, and to receive the Good News of God's grace is to repent, and to receive the abundant blessings just as the Lord intends.

**So it seems to me, that a gloomy shame and sorrow-filled Lent is a corruption that dishonors the expansiveness of God's love.**

I believe our world is becoming more dangerous and difficult, **and I don't know God's purpose, plan or intention in all this.**

But I do know that the Lord has not and will not be defeated,  
**which is also a most needed & appropriate lesson for Lent.**

Therefore, this Lenten season, let us seek God's will for us:  
lives that are more consistent with God's good design  
lives more faithful toward becoming our best  
lives more purposeful as God lovingly intends.

During this season of Lent, I am asking the Lord to shine a Light,  
and to scrub & clean, and bring to healing all of my dark places,  
**so let us consider, that what God desires for us  
to live a better life than we are living today.**

Lent is our time to revitalize our faith and faith commitments  
and appreciatively seek to discern God's will for our lives  
as we rediscover God's love and rekindle our love for God.