

Lent Ash Wednesday B  
Peace, Seattle  
February 14, 2018  
Joel 2:12-17, Ps 51, Matt 6:16-21

## **HEART'S TRUE HOME**

Return to me with all your heart... Rend your hearts, not your clothing...

Teach me wisdom in my secret heart... Create in me a clean heart, O God...

Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also...

**The sound of beating hearts echoes through our texts this evening on this Ash Wednesday / Valentine's Day.**

**And hearts have been much on my mind as of late—particularly the heart muscle which beats in our chests, pumping the oxygen-infused blood that keeps us alive.**

Two of our brothers here at Peace, first Cal in November and then David in January, have had open-heart surgeries. And on February 1st my younger brother Mark suffered a major heart attack. Thankfully, all three men are recovering well.

In addition to serving a congregation in Bemidji, Minnesota, Mark's also a pilot and makes weekly in-state delivery flights for UPS. He also drives school and charter buses on routes that often take him through remote stretches of the frozen North. So the fact that he was at home rather than flying a plane or driving a bus when he felt symptoms coming on, proved to be a true godsend.

He had the good sense to get to the hospital quickly, and within minutes of his arrival doctors were snaking stents up through his wrist and arm to open up an artery that was completely closed. Subsequent tests have shown—God be praised—that Mark suffered no long term damage to his heart.

**But his cardiologist made it clear just how close he had come to disaster:**

IF YOU'D LAID DOWN FOR A REST INSTEAD OF COMING IN, he told Mark, YOU'D BE DEAD.

The whole scenario has reminded me how vulnerable we can be, without recognizing it; without knowing it. We take so much for granted...

**The season of Lent we begin today is a season which supports recognizing and owning our vulnerability rather than denying that we have a problem. And this is where the meaning of HEART shifts from the muscle in our chest to the center of our being.**

Our psalm, "Create in me a clean heart, O God," is thought to have been written by King David after he was confronted for taking another man's wife as his own, and then tried to cover his trail when she became pregnant; it was a cover-up with deathly consequences.

"Cast me not away from your presence," David, convicted, pleads, "and take not your Holy Spirit from me."

The prophet Joel while announcing impending doom for God's wayward people, simultaneously announces God's gracious invitation, "Even now, return to me with all our heart—rend your heart and not your clothing."

The invitation of Lent is an invitation to strip off the layers we use to insulate ourselves from the truth of our condition. The invitation is to be honest to God. For it's when we are most honest with God and with ourselves that God's tenderness is revealed... and we behold a God who, as the prophet proclaims, is "gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love."

This refrain, which appears again and again throughout the Hebrew Testament, has at its root, a word which means "womb;" and it is this deep, deep love springing from the womb of God, which God is so eager to show us—if we can only be honest about our need.<sup>1</sup>

That's the journey. Owning the vulnerability of our hearts; and seeing the vulnerability—the wombiness—opening up in God when we do so.

**This journey of Lent, these 40 days, is a journey through the wilderness territory in our own lives, and also a journey which has us traversing the wilderness places of our culture.**

As you may have heard, another mass shooting took place this afternoon at an American high school—this time in Parkland, Florida. Reports say 17 people are dead and 14 wounded. Half-way into the second month of 2018, and a dozen school shootings have taken place in this country. In spite of all the efforts to keep students safe, gun violence at schools is accelerating rather than diminishing, and leading us deeper into a desert from which no relief is apparent.

**God's people know about wilderness.** They spent 40 years in the wilderness trying all the while to learn to trust God and live in community without hurting each other. It didn't always turn out well! It still doesn't. Yet God remained faithful. "Even now, says the LORD, return to me with all your heart...rend your hearts, not your garments." There's an invitation there to go deeper than the surface, to go deeper than words.

Old Testament scholar Fred Niedner reminds us that WILDERNESS is the longest story in scripture. The Hebrew word for wilderness, Fred points out, is mid-bar, which comes from the Hebrew word for "word," da-bar. To get to "wilderness" you begin with "da-bar" and add to it a preposition that means "away from," "apart from," or "without." What you end up with, then, is a word for "wilderness" that translates, "*the place where words don't work anymore,*" "*the place where meaning eludes us,*" "*the place in which we don't have the words for what we're experiencing.*"

Wilderness is that place beyond—without words, and all of us have stood in that place in our lives. In those times it may seem to us, as it did to God's people at times, that we are feeling the weight of God's wrath; or we may find ourselves desperately casting about looking for someone besides ourselves to blame; or we may feel so numb that all the possible explanations or reasons for our experience fall hollow on our ears.

No one gets out of the wilderness without dying. That's the hard lesson God's people keep on having to learn over and over again. The life of faith is a long pilgrimage in which we continually let go, more and more, ceding control of ourselves, our agendas, our possessions, our illusions—all we have so carefully gathered and sought to preserve—putting them into the hands of God, to be left standing in the buff with only a bare-naked trust to hold on to.

---

<sup>1</sup> Wil Gafney, *Working Preacher*. [http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=3564](http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3564)

This Lent, we're making our worship space into a tent, with the intent of joining God's people on their journey through the wilderness, a journey that will lead us to the heart of God as revealed in Jesus.

It's no coincidence that the word "heart" occurs over 800 times in the Hebrew Scriptures and 150 times in the books of the New Testament. This whole journey of faith we're on together is all about finding our hearts' true home.

So on each of the five Wednesday evenings we gather here, we'll bring our honest-to-God selves, our stories of lament and words of hope, and our prayers (always our prayers) to the experiences of wilderness that are confronting us and tempting us in our time and place.

And those heartfelt prayers, which we'll write on miniature scrolls, and bring forward and place in this heart shaped frame, will become part of the great tapestry of prayer that grows throughout this season, grows in the heart of God.

Tonight we take the first step on that journey, and we take it together. We come for ashes; then we come for bread. And God promises, in Jesus, to meet us in both.

Amen.