



TRINITY EPISCOPAL CHURCH

on the Branford Green

May you find Christ, Community and Compassion within these historic walls.

First Sunday in Lent
March 5, 2017
The Rev. Sharon K. Gracen

Last year during Lent, I was honored to share this sermon time with some lovely and brave people who agreed to share stories of their time spent in the desert, the wilderness. We heard stories of cancer and depression, of caring for a loved one as he disappeared into the fog of dementia and for a daughter as she battled a disease that not even a parent's love could stop. We heard of healing after rape and betrayal and of a journey in search of healing after the murder of 20 school children in Sandy Hook. It was a powerful season in the spiritual life of this congregation. I will always be grateful for it.

After that, approaching the Lenten pulpit this year was a bit intimidating. Some people had asked if we would hear more stories this year but it didn't seem wise to try to duplicate last years' experience. After stewing about this for the last couple of months, it came to me that the answer was poetry and that if I looked, I would find five poems for us to take on our Lenten walk into the wilderness.

This first poem came to me unexpectedly with a perfection that seemed more than a little divinely inspired. Jan Richardson is a poet whom I discovered last year and I've already shared her story and some of her beautiful words. Most recently her poetry has chronicled her unexpected widowhood and the grief and grace she has encountered. This poem reflects the reading we heard last week – the Transfiguration of Jesus on the mountain top and the voice that declared him to be God's son and beloved. It also calls to mind the short poem by Raymond Carver that has challenged us to know ourselves as beloved.



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Beloved Is Where We Begin

If you would enter
into the wilderness,
do not begin
without a blessing.
Do not leave
without hearing
who you are:
Beloved,
named by the One
who has traveled this path
before you.
Do not go
without letting it echo
in your ears,
and if you find
it is hard
to let it into your heart,
do not despair.
That is what
this journey is for.
I cannot promise
this blessing will free you
from danger,
from fear,
from hunger
or thirst,
from the scorching
of sun
or the fall
of the night.

But I can tell you
that on this path
there will be help.
I can tell you
that on this way
there will be rest.
I can tell you
that you will know
the strange graces
that come to our aid
only on a road
such as this,
that fly to meet us
bearing comfort
and strength,
that come alongside us
for no other cause
than to lean themselves
toward our ear
and with their
curious insistence
whisper our name:
Beloved.
Beloved.
Beloved.
—Jan Richardson
from *Circle of Grace*

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Twice Jesus was called Beloved; at his baptism, after which he was led by the spirit into the wilderness for 40 days of fasting, prayer and trial. The second time was last week's Transfiguration story, after which he heads to Jerusalem for the ultimate trial, a trial that ends on the cross. Jan Richardson suggests the power of knowing himself as beloved as the source of his strength and courage. I believe that she is right. Our ability to persevere in the midst of trouble is greatly enhanced by how we know ourselves and the support that we have. It is also possible that a new understanding of being worthy of love and belonging, belovedness, may be the way out of such a time of trial.

Johann Hari is a British journalist who has experience with addiction, his own and in his family and circle of friends. About four years ago, he set out to learn about addiction and what he discovered challenged everything we think we know about drug addiction, and probably every other kind of addiction. He spoke to addicts around the world and scientists, researchers and politicians. One such researcher is Bruce Alexander from Vancouver who looked at old experiments involving rats in a cage and two bottles, one with plain water and one laced with heroin. The rats quickly became fatally addicted. Dr. Alexander discovered the flaw in the experiment – the rats were isolated, alone in a cage. So he tried something different. He created what he called Rat Park, with lots of mazes, colored balls, plenty of food and most importantly, lots of other rats. None of them were interested in the heroin water. Even rats that had become addicted in their solitary cages lost their desire for the drug when they were reintroduced to rat society. Alexander is not alone in his thinking that addiction is not the crime or disease as we have been told it is. Instead, it is a crisis of identity and meaning, a desperate response to a sense of disconnection. That void can come from any number of traumas, a sense of being undeserving or unworthy of love. For many addicts, drugs are the thing with which they can bond that will make the pain of life go away. Johann Hari wrote in his book, that the opposite of addiction is not sobriety, but connection. In other words, addiction happens when people do not know that they are beloved. I have become more and more convinced that so many of our ills, depression, eating disorders, kids who hurt themselves, violence, all sorts of isms, all have their roots in an inability to feel beloved.

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My mother was addicted to many things, including heroin at one point in her life. I don't have a great store of memories and knowledge of her because she was mostly unavailable even before she disappeared from my life at about age 7. What I do know about her is that there doesn't seem to be any evidence that she carried with her a sense of worthiness. The more people turned from her, the worse her addiction became. My sister and I will never know how our lives were altered because no one taught our mother that she was beloved.

It appears to me that this is the work of the church and we might start right here. I encourage you all as a Lenten exercise to consider where you fall on the beloved continuum. Do you really feel it and believe it of yourself? Do you doubt that you are beloved? If that's where you find yourself, even occasionally, figure out what makes you think that. What tapes do you hear that whisper of "you're not worth it," "that's for someone better," "what makes you think you're special?"

The purpose of the Incarnation – the purpose of Jesus, Emmanuel, is for us to know that, just as he received the name Beloved, it is ours also. Our lives are one long Lent until we accept it. It's only when we truly know that we are beloved that we can turn around and love our neighbor into believing it about themselves. Only when we live in belovedness is the Christ within us fully realized. The harder you have to work to accept it, the more important it is. Look around, these people are those who are here to help with that. What a great reason to be the church. What a great time to be the church. Welcome to a holy Lent.

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