

Pitt Street Uniting Church, 14 February 2016
A Contemporary Reflection by Rev Dr Margaret Mayman
Lent 1C

Deuteronomy 26:1-11, Luke 4: 1-13; Contemporary Reading (see page 3)

Wouldn't it make a difference to sing the Biblical story, to enter into it in ways that are not just about listening with our heads, but responding with our hearts?

Last Wednesday was Ash Wednesday. The first day in Lent. At our small Ash Wednesday service at Pitt Street - and at the Inner West Neighbourhood Group, which also has an Ash Wednesday service - we used ash made from last year's palms from Palm Sunday, mixed with water to symbolise the living water of baptism and oil to symbolise healing.

Ash, which symbolically invited us to come back to earth. To wonder at the gift of life: my life; our life with the earth; the shared body of existence. Ash which reminded us of our humanity. The remainder of that ash has been placed symbolically on the communion table today.

Today is the first Sunday in Lent, and on this day, we reflect on the wilderness experience of Jesus.

Traditionally, Lent has been the season of abstinence or self-denial. A time of doing without. A time of fasting.

I went to the supermarket last week to buy some tea light candles for the Ash Wednesday service, and while I was there I picked up a block of dark fair trade chocolate, as you do. Looking at the tea lights and the chocolate, the woman at the check-out asked if I was planning a romantic evening for Valentine's Day. I told her the candles were for the Ash Wednesday service at church - and the chocolate I planned to eat for nourishment, pleasure and energy. She was obviously familiar with Lent and was quite surprised that I was buying chocolate, assuming that if I was observing Lent, I would be abstaining from chocolate. As if!

I explained that my Lenten commitment involved some small attempts to take up some life-giving practices, rather than give up things that were actually rather essential aspects of enjoying life. So my Lenten disciplines are more swimming, to meditate more, and to work with other people of good will to do everything I possibly can to stop 67 children and their families being transferred to Nauru.

Abstinence and self-denial have been the Lenten way according to much of our broad church tradition. Today wine and chocolate seem to be the most common things that people give up for Lent.

That we might rekindle our faith and be blessed during this period of Lent... Yes, certainly that. But I'm not so sure about 'abstinence' or 'self-denial' - though I do know that such practices are meaningful for some of our community - and I don't want to denigrate that. But I would hope also that Lent might become for us a time of doing with, doing more, rather than doing without. A time to take up rather than give up. A time of self-discovery and self-affirmation, a time to claim our connectedness.

A source of life and light for my spiritual journey as Lent begins has been dipping in to Jan Richardson's latest book, *Circle of Grace*.

And so today, after what has been a rather huge week, I am drawing on her insights about how we enter again this season of renewal. This year Easter is going to be very early and, honestly, Ash Wednesday seemed to come far too quickly. We only had five Sundays after Epiphany, where some years there are eight. The entry into the year of Luke's gospel seems hurried. Baby in the manger, Jesus getting lost at the temple, baptism in the Jordan and, with some attention to stories that actually occur after the temptations, we're into the desert. It's all been a bit rushed, really. So let's slow down and revisit a moment on the journey - one that we did not attend to because we celebrated Epiphany rather than the Baptism of Jesus this year.

Jan Richardson suggests that Jesus went into the desert with the baptismal waters of the Jordan still clinging to him. But also clinging to him was the way he was named by God at the moment of baptism. When a voice from the heavens announced: this is my Beloved. This is my Beloved.

Jesus' spirit quest did not begin in alienation from the Holy but in being named by grace as Beloved. That name sustained him in what lay ahead: wilderness, hunger, loneliness, and temptation.

Jan Richardson suggests that we also go into the wilderness of Lent with that name. That we know ourselves as Beloved.

Jesus shared our humanity and we share with him the gift of grace - of being beloved of the Sacred. So on this first Sunday of Lent, we are invited to enter the terrain of the season, knowing, claiming that we are beloved. There is much that lies ahead of us that we do not know, but of this we can be sure - each one of us is beloved!

The book, *Circle of Grace*, contains a blessing for the beloved community as we enter Lent. It's titled "***Beloved is Where We Begin.***" I want to share it with you today.

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 travelled 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.

From this assurance, we may face what lies ahead of us.

My hope is for Lent to become 'forty days' when we can uncover and discover once again our own possibilities – for our own connectedness to the Sacred, to the earth and to our fellow creatures. Self-discovery and connectedness rather than self-denial and isolation.

Lent, seen as a life affirming discovery rather than life denying, says we are not judged by our past, but by the way we relate to our past. A time of reflection and real change, of transformation; changing our minds, changing our hearts, that we might be changed and so change our world.

In the life of Jesus, we see someone who felt called to break the culture of violence characterised by a 'tit-for-tat' mentality of revenge and reprisal.

The biblical story tells us of Jesus' forty days in the wilderness. "*Full of the Holy Spirit*," and fresh from his baptism, Jesus is led into the wilderness. In whatever way we understand the complexities of this story, it is clear that Jesus, like shamans before and after him, must go on a "vision quest" in order to clarify his vocation and claim his future as God's beloved child.

The "devil" is not the central character of the story, even though it plays the role of Jesus' tempter. Although many of us no longer believe in a personal "devil," we can appreciate the reality of temptation in our lives. Temptation is, by nature, seductive. We are seldom tempted by "bad" things (which is why a focus on chocolate and alcohol seems trivial to me), but - as Jesus' temptations reveal - people are tempted by "good" things that stand in the way of realizing our true vocation.

There is nothing inherently wrong with security, power, and comfort (the three temptations that Jesus faced), except as they (security, power and comfort) alienate us from others and from God's vision for our lives. Indeed, facing temptation can strengthen our spiritual lives if we, following the example of Jesus, face our temptations in the presence of the Sacred.

Jesus' sojourn in the desert is profoundly Christological. Jesus is tempted. Truly tempted. He is not perfect or immune to the human condition, in all its ambiguity. Jesus is tempted as a whole person, who is able to choose for or against his destiny as God's healer and messenger. God's aims are never compelling, nor does God plan all the details of our lives.

God's impetus, God's passion for us, calls us to creativity, not passive obedience. God wills us to improvise, to colour outside the lines in ways that bring beauty and justice to the world and joy to our lives.

Likewise, the reading from Deuteronomy describes a habit of generosity and gratitude.

In giving God, and implicitly our faith community and the world, our "first fruits," we acknowledge our dependence on God's graceful care and the generosity of the universe.

Open-hearted generosity is not accidental but a spiritual virtue that arises from an ongoing commitment to share what we have with God and with the

vulnerable in our midst. This generosity is lived out day to day in simple acts of kindness and care - as well as more dramatic gifts to the community, such as the offers of sanctuary to people facing persecution. Sharing our "first fruits" allows God's abundant life to flow through us more energetically and dynamically. Our lives grow in meaning and our vision of the universe expands, as we recognize the essential interdependence of all life.

This is the heart of Eucharistic living, the remembrance of all that God has done through the creation and evolution of the universe, the inspiration of prophets and wise women and men, and the evolving movements of the Spirit in our time.

Sharing the bread and the cup - and our "first fruits" - connects us with all things and allows us to become channels of blessing to the world. We discover that it is a blessing to bless others.

We are beloved. We are called to be the beloved community.

God's generosity is for everyone. Today, divine generosity calls us, calls the church, to experience God's revelation in the many varieties of human experience, religiosity, sexuality, ethnicity and nationality.

God's universal love does not depend on us - it is freely given - but it takes the shape of our love and our willingness to be God's partners in protecting the vulnerable and healing the world.