

Ash Wednesday – March 6, 2019  
Lexington Presbyterian Church

A Lenten Fast Beyond Our Comfort Zone?  
Homily by Deb Klein

*Isaiah 58:6, 9b-12*

*Is not this the fast that I choose:  
to loose the bonds of injustice,  
to undo the thongs of the yoke,  
to let the oppressed go free,  
and to break every yoke?*

*If you remove the yoke from among you,  
the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil,  
if you offer your food to the hungry  
and satisfy the needs of the afflicted,  
then your light shall rise in the darkness  
and your gloom be like the noonday.*

*The LORD will guide you continually,  
and satisfy your needs in parched places,  
and make your bones strong;  
and you shall be like a watered garden,  
like a spring of water,  
whose waters never fail.*

*<sup>12</sup> Your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt;  
you shall raise up the foundations of many generations;  
you shall be called the repairer of the breach,  
the restorer of streets to live in.*

Easter falls late this year, on the third Sunday of April and so tonight, on the 6<sup>th</sup> of March, we begin our yearly Lenten journey. This is our time of preparation to unpack again the amazing story of Jesus, our crucified and risen Lord. And again, we challenge ourselves to go deeper into this story, and to narrow the distance we create between ourselves and God.

Of the four texts read this evening, I'm drawn to the one from Isaiah. It reminds me of a song Bill and I learned at a Ghost Ranch, a Presbyterian Retreat Center in the high desert of New Mexico. Its words are: "You shall be like a garden, like a deep spring whose waters never fail." Like a Taize chant, our group sang it over and over again, often outside, gazing out into the arid and rocky desert. The song became very comforting to us, as we imagined God's love and mercy as a deep spring of life-giving water bubbling up within us, always flowing,

always refreshing, always renewing. It was an affirmation, a promise of God's ever present, life-giving love.

But then one day, I wondered, what was the context of these words? What was going on when Isaiah heard these words? Upon investigation I learned that Israel had recently been freed by the Babylonians and allowed to return to Jerusalem. Yet, all of their hopes for living again in their homeland had been dashed. Their beloved Jerusalem lay in rubble – everything needed rebuilding and they were dispirited. They were going through the motions of worship, prayer, and fasting, but their efforts were not very pleasing to the LORD.

Through the prophet, God said, “Is not this the fast I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice...to let the oppressed go free? Is it not to share your bread with the poor? If you offer your food to the hungry and satisfy the needs of the afflicted, **then** your light shall rise in the darkness and your gloom be as noonday. And then, tied to God's deep desire that we care for the most vulnerable of our brothers and sisters, came these words: “The Lord will continually guide you and satisfy your needs in parched places....and.....*you shall be like a garden, like a deep spring, whose waters never fail.*”

Words for me that had come to be so comforting now became challenging. It isn't that God doesn't want to give all people this deep, refreshing water for love and mercy is forever God's intention. But it seems the privilege of this comfort is tied to a responsibility – to care for all, especially the hungry, the homeless, and to let the oppressed go free.

This was also Jesus' agenda. Quoting Isaiah, Jesus said, “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free.” God's loving intention to care for and uplift the poor and the oppressed was given to Jesus as well. This is God's way in this world. And this loving intention has been given to us also, as those who are disciples of Jesus, God's chosen and beloved son.

Last year at this time our church, led by John Turnbull, initiated three book discussions on racism. Those of us who read Between the World and Me, The Making of a Racist, and Tears I Cannot Stop Crying learned a great deal. Mainly we learned how being white had blinded us to the injustice and discrimination that people of color have in the past, and still experience in this country. Many of us have continued to read and discuss this issue, because with each new book we open, we gain a deeper understanding of how deeply ingrained in our society is the evil of racism. None of us today created slavery, none of us would identify ourselves as racists, but what I'm coming to see is that racism has become systemic, encoded into our laws and practices, creating disadvantages and lost opportunities for generation after generation of our fellow Americans.

Let me give you just one example of something I learned this past week in the midst of reading Waking Up White, (a book Shenandoah Presbytery has commended to all our churches for study and discussion). It has to do with the GI Bill that provided returning World War II service men and women to come home to free college education and a housing loan. I grew up in a home subsidized by the government for my dad's service to the country – many of us baby boomers did. What I didn't know was that these benefits were virtually inaccessible to the one million black Americans who had served in the war because of rules made by the Federal Housing Authority that prohibited new housing sales to people of color, through a system known as redlining. Government rules and codes that limit access to people of color defines systemic racism. The same was true for the free education benefits. Only 4 percent of black GI's were ever able to benefit from a free college education because at that time there simply weren't enough slots in American colleges to accept that number of black students. The GI Bill was tremendously important in establishing millions of white Americans in home ownership and a good education, allowing that generation to accumulate wealth and pass it on to the next generation. But this simply was not true for our fellow black Americans. This is systemic racism, and we white folks can only learn about by intentional study, for our white privilege hides it from us.

Yet, God's words sound again this night:

“Is this not the fast that I choose, to loose the bonds of injustice, to let the oppressed go free?”

What if we wake up to a kind of Lenten fast which pushes us beyond our comfort zone - to read and learn of the injustices that are ongoing in our society against people of color, the poor, the hungry, the asylum seeker, that is all people at the margins of society for whom God has always had a special affection? What if we humbled ourselves to learn something troubling but true? What new compassion would flow from us if we better understood the harms done by unjust policy and practices? What new light could we shine into the darkness of the oppressed? What better fast could we choose than to loose the bonds of injustice?

Tomorrow, along with this short homily, I will post a list of books (*see list below*) that Bill and I have read, and ones we still want to read. It seems like a small thing to read, but in so doing hearts and minds are changed, and changed hearts lead to new commitments, and new commitments lead to new conversations and actions, which push against systemic racism. These are old, old problems that we won't solve in forty brief days, but one day, with God's guidance, we too may be those who help repair the breach between brothers and sisters of our one God. May we, with God's direction, be those who help establish a beloved community within and among all our neighborhoods.

May God hasten that day!

## **Good Reads that Will Take You Beyond Your Comfort Zone**

Between the World and Me, 2015, by Ta-Nehisi Coates

Tears We Cannot Stop – A Sermon to White America, 2017 by Michael Eric Dyson

The Making of A Racist, A Southerner Reflects on Family, History and the Slave Trade, 2016, by Charles B. Dew

The Cross and the Lynching Tree, 2017, by James H. Cone

America's Original Sin, 2016 , by Jim Wallis

March, (in 3 Volumes), 2013, by John Lewis, Andrew Aydin & Nate Powell

The New Jim Crow – Massive Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness, 2012, by Michelle Alexander

The Warmth of Other Suns – The Epic Story of America's Great Migration, 2010, by Isabel Wilkerson

Just Mercy: A Story of Justice and Redemption, 2014, by Bryan Stevenson

Slavery by Another Name, 2009, Douglas A. Blackmon

Hidden Figures, 2016, by Margo Lee Shetterly

Water from the Rock, 1991, by Sylvia R. Frey

A Riff of Love: Notes on Community and Belonging, 2018, by Greg Jarrell

Blue Note Preaching in a Post-Soul World, 2015, by Otis Moss

The Souls of Black Folk, 1903, by W.E.B. DuBois

Go Tell It on the Mountain, 1952, by James Baldwin

Invisible Man, 1952, by Ralph Ellison

Native Son, 1940, by Richard Wright

Meditations of the Heart, 1953, Jesus and the Disinherited, 1949, by Howard Thurman

Strength to Love, 1963, Letter from the Birmingham Jail, 1963, Where Do We go From Here? 1967, by Martin Luther King, Jr.

The Help, 2011, by Kathryn Stockett (a novel)

The Invention of Wings, 2015, by Sue Monk Kidd (a novel)

*We invite your reading suggestions too!*