

February 25, 2018

Year B; Second Sunday in Lent

Genesis 17: 1-7; 15-16

Psalm 22: 22-30

Romans 4: 13-25

Mark 8: 31-38

“In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.”

Our kitchen windows face east, towards our neighbor’s house, and a stand of tall trees beyond, a few pines but mostly maples and oaks and other hardwoods, all bare now still, despite this warm spell.....it is still winter-tide.

Tim and I are both early birds, morning people...and we get up ridiculously early, stumbling in the dark kitchen focused on coffee and tea....The dog has learned to be an early bird with us and wants to get up as soon as we are...Though he is far wiser, and after a run outside and a snack or 2....he often goes back to bed....

As the hour moves from 5am to 6am and on to 6:30am.....one of us will pull the blinds on the kitchen windows and we see the first light in the east, and those hardwood branches etched across the early-light sky, and we have to stop in the midst of planning our days, and absorb the stark beauty of each leafless branch, vivid-black-dark against the pink-purple-shining white of the sky to the east.

And as much as I love the sight of those trees, they also often offer me a gift beyond their artistry, a gift of a memory, of a time when I could not imagine spring ever coming again.

Another sunrise, another window, this time my car windshield, many years ago in Richmond, looking at the bare trees at daybreak as I drove my so familiar, early morning commute to St. Christopher's School.

It was late February in a year when I was ministering to 2 families at the same time, both families in the chaos of the first days after the death of a 30something parent.....young children grieving.....surviving spouses devastated.

A big part of my ministry at St. Chris was grief counseling but this February the deaths were only a few days apart and had come suddenly, so the losses permeated not the only the families, but the chaplain too.....all of us heartbroken.

And as I drove and looked at the bare trees I realized I could no longer imagine spring coming.....ever....ever..... coming again.

I was heartbroken.....and in the wilderness.

As a southerner I have long played the joyous late February, early March game of....when can I see the first buds on a tree? And as a southerner I have never had to wait very long.

If I moved to Maine and played this game I might become desperate, still looking for buds into April and even May! But in Virginia the buds reliably come quickly, the fattening buds on the ornamental pears..... that wondrous faint haze of red on the first maple.....

But that dawn, through that car window, as I looked at the trees, I could not see buds on the trees, but even more, I could not imagine them ever appearing again.

Death and grief were present with my heartbroken self..... and resurrection was absent.....in my wilderness....

Though we spoke of the wilderness last week, and Jesus's temptation there.....This week our reading echoes back to it.

Jesus is telling his friends the truth.....the hardest truth....that he will, as our reading says ".....must undergo great suffering..." and that he will not be celebrated as the Messiah, but rather he will be arrested, attacked, and crucified...

And Peter.....our friend and reflection of our humanness....Peter pulls Jesus aside and rebukes him....reprimands him, scolds him, argues with Jesus for telling such a gloomy tale of the future....both, because Peter can only see a Messiah who is a king....and because he cares so much for Jesus...

Don't tell me of suffering....don't speak of death.....

And so in only one of 2 instances...Jesus rebukes one of his friends...speaking in the strongest terms to sweet Peter...."Get behind me, Satan".....

SATAN! The tempter....Jesus speaks so strongly to Peter because he is tempting him as surely as the devil had in the wilderness....

And though Peter had pulled Jesus aside to rebuke him, in private...Jesus pulls Peter back into the group, and reprimands him in front of all the disciples.....

And all Peter was trying to do was to remind Jesus that a King a Messiah was meant to be a powerful shining figure....that's how the world will recognize you...not a suffering defeated criminal on a cross....

Please don't suffer....please don't speak of your death.....

Peter in his own wilderness of embarrassment and hurt and confusion....Who is this Jesus?.....Peter....heartbroken.....

And so we turn again to the invitation that is this season of Lent....in this 2nd Sunday of Lent....the invitation offered on Ash Wednesday is still there...not too late to accept the invitation to a holy Lent.

And to join me and Peter in bringing our heartbroken selves to the cross....to share our despair, our confusion...our falling short....

On Ash Wednesday we always read Psalm 51....a long psalm that speaks of our heartbroken selves....

“The sacrifice of God is a troubled spirit; a broken and contrite heart.....

The writer Richard Floyd speaks of that broken heart:

“To see the dead places within and without us can break our hearts. But (Psalm 51) says that this very condition of heartbrokenness is a sacrifice acceptable to God. Because once we open our eyes to the ways, (that) the power of death has hold over us, and feel sorrow and remorse (which is what contrition means) God meets us there and can begin to ready us for the promise of new life.” (Still Speaking Daily Devotional, February 10, 2016)

I will never forget that February when I could no longer imagine spring ever coming again, as I can never forget too, that I found the only way I could see the hope again, feel life again.....was in surrender, acknowledging my utter dependence on God, and in that surrender to find again the buds, the first leaves finally again on the trees on the horizon, right outside my window.

Amen.

The Reverend Megan Limburg