

Suttons Bay Congregational Church
Mark 1:9-15, First Sunday in Lent

March 5, 2006
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The Baptism and Temptation of Jesus

9At that time Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. 10As Jesus was coming up out of the water, he saw heaven being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. 11And a voice came from heaven: "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased."

12At once the Spirit sent him out into the desert, 13and he was in the desert forty days, being tempted by Satan. He was with the wild animals, and angels attended him.

The Calling of the First Disciples

14After John was put in prison, Jesus went into Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God. 15"The time has come," he said. "The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news!"

Let us pray.
O come Holy Spirit.
Come as the fire, and burn
Come as the wind, and cleanse
Come as the light, and reveal
Come as the water, and refresh.
Convict, convert and consecrate us,
Until we are wholly yours.
Amen.

A few of you recently have mentioned that you don't like Lent. You say that the songs, readings, and messages of this sacred season are depressing. The implication is that you don't drag yourselves out of warm cozy beds on cold gusty mornings, go through the routines of bathing, dressing, and breakfasting only to get here and find yourselves getting beat up by indictments and judgments that make you feel bad, guilty, or unworthy. And if what you're implying is your truth, if you want to come to church to feel good, inspired, and reassured, then you're not alone or unique. The moderator of a church I served as a student minister refused to let us put the word "sin" into any kind of mission, vision, or statement of faith. She didn't want to come to church and hear about things that might make her feel bad or guilty. She even objected to saying prayers of confession. She said church should make you feel good. Her expectations are shared by many. The assumption that church is a happy place is widespread. Indeed, some churches avoid the Lenten season all together—skipping from the joy of Christmas to the joy of Easter pausing only for a few chocolates on Valentines Day and a couple of pints of Guinness to celebrate St. Patrick's Day. But there were some of you, indeed a good number of you, whose schedules allowed for you to pause for something else this past week. It wasn't sweet or happy, in fact some of you even got a little dirty as the ashes for Ash Wednesday were smudged across your skin. But it was real and authentic. We'd never done that service here before and so there was a kind of vulnerability, an openness that often isn't present during our time together on Sunday mornings.

And in a way that's just why we need Lent. These six Sundays of the year aren't like the other forty-six. These Sundays are different. Things happen that we don't necessarily expect. We are a bit more vulnerable, a little less sure of ourselves. This vulnerability and uncertainty leave us

more open to the possibility that this will be the Sunday that God breaks through our shell and enters our hearts in profound and life-changing ways.

And is often the case, in fact I'd say is usually the case, God is most present to us when we aren't the happy, shiny Sunday morning people that we've grown accustomed to thinking we should be. This reality reminds me of the famous poem, *Footprints in the Sand*. It could be considered heresy to question this well-loved poem that most of you probably have printed on a plaque hanging in your hallway or embroidered on an afghan that's folded up on your couch. You likely know its theme—a person looks back on life and sees only one set of footprints in the sand. The person asks Jesus—"Where were you in the tough times when it looks like I was walking all alone?" Jesus replies, "I was there—I was carrying you." Now before you start hurling rotten tomatoes at me for questioning this piece of our modern religious canon, let me say that I believe in the wisdom of this poem, that God is with us during the rough times. But I think there's a more important reality of which we need even more reminding. The facet of life that I think it fails to recognize is that when things are going well, we also forget about God—in fact I think that if we're going to forget that God is part of the equation, we're much more likely to do it when things are going well than when times are hard. When we're sick or grieving, we are often reminded that God is with us, carrying us along over that tough terrain of heartbreak. But when it's smooth sailing, when we're happy, shiny people--or at least when we're trying are darndest to be--I think we begin to fall into the temptation of hubris—thinking that it's all our doing that things are going well. We begin to believe that we're reaping the rewards of our hard work. We begin to believe in the power of "I", as in "Look what I did" instead of the power of "Thy" as in "Thy will be done."

Lent is our opportunity to be reminded of the "Thy". Lent is a time during which we follow Jesus into the wilderness. Sure, we know where the journey takes us—past a cross of despair and finally to an empty tomb representing Christ's conquering of death. But just because we know where we're going to end up, doesn't mean we should skip the journey all together. If we skip this wilderness time, we skip from the manger to the empty tomb. And in doing so, we miss out on all of the lessons, advice, and wisdom Jesus gives us for the living of our days.

And here's the thing about the lessons Jesus teaches—they're not particularly happy. They're not what folks were expecting to hear. Jesus' words turned conventional wisdom on its ear. What he said wasn't what people then—or people now—wanted to hear. Jesus was not, contrary to popular belief, Dr. Feel Good. Sure, there was some of that—the healings, the invitation for the children to come to him, the sitting down with folks to eat and drink. But along with these acts of gracious hospitality and kindness, Jesus also issued plenty of challenges, critiques, and seemingly impossible demands. Let's just take a moment to think about some of the things he said . . .

-“Take nothing for the journey except a staff—no bread, no bag, no money in your belts.”

Mk. 6:8

-“If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me and for the gospel will save it.” Mk. 8:34b-35

-“You have heard it was said, ‘Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.’ But I tell you, Do not resist an evil person. If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also.

And if someone wants to sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well.”
Mt. 5:38-40

-“Go, sell everything you have and give it to the poor . . .” Mk 10:21b

These lessons are demanding, they ask a lot of us. And when we pray, “Thy will be done”, this is the kind of stuff we’re praying for—to be humbled, made poor, given burdens to bear, and put in danger for the sake of our faith—for Jesus’ sake. By shaking us out of our usual routines, Lent forces us to look at these lessons and think more carefully about our faith and how we live it. It gives us the opportunity to consider how we worship and what we’re doing and asking for each Sunday morning for the seventy or so minutes that we’re gathered between the walls of this building.

It reminds me of something Annie Dillard wrote in *Teaching a Stone to Talk*. She asks the reader, "Does anyone have the foggiest idea of what sort of power we so blithely invoke [in worship]? Or, as I suspect, does no one believe a word of it? The churches are children playing on the floor with their chemistry sets, mixing up a batch of TNT to kill a Sunday morning. It is madness to wear ladies' straw hats and velvet hats to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews." That's the God we're dealing with during Lent. Are we really prepared to pray—and mean it when we say—thy will be done? Good Lord, what would that look like?!?! How would our lives change—or I should say oh how our lives would change—if what we prayed were to come true. I know I'm not ready for it—ready for my life to be shaken up, turned upside down, and for my eyes to be open to the bright realities of what the “Thy” will do when things finally are on earth as they are in heaven.

And during Lent, we recognize the things about ourselves and our world that need to change in order for our prayer for God's will to be done to actually be done. The potential for it to happen is here, but it's latent potential until we as individuals and as a global community get our acts together. And getting our acts together necessitates us figuring out what's wrong, what's out of order in our world, in our relationships, and in ourselves. Because we know that in order for God's light to shine brightly, we must be willing to look in the places of our lives and society that we'd really rather just keep clothed in darkness behind curtains of denial, regret, ignorance, and shame. Sure, who wouldn't rather leave well enough alone—but leaving well enough alone isn't enough when it comes to Christian discipleship. Pulling back the curtains and letting God's light shine on our sin—both individual and corporate--does not feel good. But here's the really ironic thing—if we don't, if we just leave the sin there to fester and refuse to acknowledge it and ask forgiveness for it—it will haunt us and hold us back--forever a stumbling block to our being agents of God's will being done on this earth. But as soon as we pull back the curtain, as soon as we recognize and confess our sin, POOF! At least in God's eyes. It's done and over with—melted away quicker than the Wicked Witch of the West melted away after she was doused with a bucket of water. That's why the prayer of confession is always followed by the assurance of pardon, the assurance that we're forgiven, that it's okay, and that we can move on in confidence.

And that friends, doesn't feel bad. Needing forgiveness doesn't have anything to do with feeling unworthy. That's kind of the whole point of Christianity isn't it—that though there's nothing we can do to be worthy of God's love, we're worthy of it anyway by virtue of Christ making us that

way. Lent is about figuring just how unworthy we are of redemption and mercy and forgiveness and love and then realizing at the end of it all, when the cross is empty and there's no one in the tomb, realizing that it's not about us, it's about Jesus—who is not Dr. Feel Good but rather the healer of our souls, the one who makes us oh so worthy of love, redemption, and salvation.

And so please, even if you don't like the somber music, challenging messages, and changes in worship, please allow yourself to walk this Lenten journey through the shadowed places in life. Pray the prayers, absorb God's word, listen carefully for God's voice, and tell your story and listen to others tell theirs—both the good parts and the bad. Because if we don't acknowledge the bad news—what's the use of the Good News? How can we experience the glorious radiance of Easter Sunday sunrise if we don't first go to Gethsemane and Golgotha?

Yes friends, it's true. Dr. Feel Good has left the building. And now we're left with some time on our hands—thirty-four days to be precise—to reflect, contemplate, and consider what it means to be a Christian as we journey through this Lenten wilderness together.