

Empty that we might be filled  
Sermon March 17, 2019  
The Rev. Dr. Martha Tucker

Blessed be God who animates our lives and calls us into a wilderness for 40 days in which we are assured that by emptying ourselves of that which is not of God, we will be filled and Eastered by the One who comes in the name of the Lord. Amen

On this the second Sunday of Lent ( though our first one together given the snow and ice last week) I think it might be important to spend some time thinking about our orientation, our disposition, as we abide in the wilderness.

Usually when we go on a 40 day trip we spend a lot of time packing, researching and planning. But the theological nature of the Lenten journey is a bit paradoxical in its call for emptiness, letting go and ridding ourselves of sin. Instead of filling words we are met with words like unfill unpack undo let go surrender...The only **plan** we might have is to return to God that we might become more aware and intentional in our faith. Our preparation is best when we empty ourselves as Jesus did to make himself supremely and divinely humble.

We are going on a 40 day journey in a wilderness where we take nothing but our faith and whatever we know of prayer and obedience.  
These are the readiness practices of Lent.

entering that wilderness involves checking our baggage at the threshold to the desert.  
stepping into that wilderness involves checking our fear at the gate.  
inhabiting that wilderness for 40 days involves wrestling with solitude and loneliness instead of cocktail parties and gourmet meals with friends.

Lent involves a stripping which can feel like a ripping or rending of our fabric.

Yet we still, being human, hedge our bets and sneak a snack into our backpacks, or a downloaded movie onto our devices, just in case it gets too hard too still too lonely

We are filled going in with many questions and anxieties. We are told to let them go and rest In God and listen

We seek comfort when uncomfortable and are told instead to live into and learn from the discomfort.

This paradox of preparation reminds me of a story:

ONCE UPON A TIME, there was a woman who set out to discover the meaning of life. First she read everything she could get her hands on--history, philosophy, psychology, religion. While she became a very smart person, nothing she read gave her the answer she was looking for. She found other smart people and asked them about the meaning of life, but while their discussions were long and lively, no two of them agreed on the same thing and still she had no answer.

Finally she put all her belongings in storage and set off in search of the meaning of life. She went to South America. She went to India. Everywhere she went, people told her

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they did not know the meaning of life, but they had heard of a man who did, only they were not sure where he lived. She asked about him in every country on earth until finally, deep in the Himalayas, someone told her how to reach his house--a tiny little hut perched on the side of a mountain just below the tree line.

She climbed and climbed to reach his front door. When she finally got there, with knuckles so cold they hardly worked, she knocked.

"Yes?" said the kind-looking old man who opened it. She thought she would die of happiness.

"I have come halfway around the world to ask you one question," she said, gasping for breath. "What is the meaning of life?"

"Please come in and have some tea," the old man said.

"No," she said. "I mean, no thank you. I didn't come all this way for tea. I came for an answer. Won't you tell me, please, what is the meaning of life?"

"We shall have tea," the old man said, so she gave up and came inside. While he was brewing the tea she caught her breath and began telling him about all the books she had read, all the people she had met, all the places she had been. The old man listened (which was just as well, since his visitor did not leave any room for him to reply), and as she talked he placed a fragile tea cup in her hand. Then he began to pour the tea. She was so busy talking that she did not notice when the tea cup was full, so the old man just kept pouring until the tea ran over the sides of the cup and spilled to the floor in a steaming waterfall.

"What are you doing?!" she yelled when the tea burned her hand. "It's full, can't you see that? Stop! There's no more room!"

"Just so," the old man said to her. "You come here wanting something from me, but what am I to do? There is no more room in your cup. Come back when it is empty and then we will talk."

There is no more room in your cup...

come back when it is empty...

How are your cups?

Rarely is our default position emptiness; after all we are looking for fullness!

we are so acquisitive; we collect things, books, poems, stuff, and think that answers are in the collecting or the collection

But just as the seeker's cup was overflowing with liquid like a water flow which is damned up, so our search for God is too often occluded by information and material knowledge, our free flowing faith is damned up...

This leads me to the kernel of today's lectionary as Lent opens up to us. I believe we are to consider obedience and faith as deeply relational ways of being instead of superficial acts of compliance. I believe that the meaning of life which we seek is already with us. Living our faith reveals it particle by dusty particle.

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Karl Barth says: "Faith is not an art. Faith is not an achievement. Faith is not a good work of which some may boast while others can excuse themselves with a shrug of the shoulders for not being capable of it. It is a decisive insight of faith itself that all of us are incapable of faith in ourselves, whether we think of its preparation, beginning, continuation, or completion. In this respect believers understand unbelievers, skeptics, and atheists better than they understand themselves. Unlike unbelievers, they regard the impossibility of faith as necessary, not accidental ..."

My own favorite definition is: Faith means that when you come to the edge of everything you know and take one more step into the mystery, one of two things will happen: you will be caught by an angel or taught to fly

We don't need to go to theologians or even to my mystical musings for the quintessential definition of the Christian faith; we need open the book of Hebrews: **Now faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see.**

**This is what the ancients were commended for.**

**By faith we understand that the universe was formed at God's command, so that what is seen was not made out of what was visible.**

Faith is a gift from God, and it is animated by God.

I wish I could give it to people, but I cannot, only God can.

What I and you are able to do is to nurture it, deepen it, listen to it, become it.

we do so by being obedient to God's will which is always for our fullness and freedom.

whenever I think of faith I think of Abraham. As impossible as it is to understand, the sacrifice of Isaac is a story of total faith. Today we learn of the humanness of Abraham's faith. present and abiding his faith nevertheless presented questions for God. God's patience answered them. But central to Abraham's narrative and to God's relationship with him, and us, is faith and ultimate obedience. Abraham was not blessed because of his actions or his questions. Abraham was blessed because of his faith. In fact, time and again, Jesus tells us stories of healing or blessing which end with something like "your faith has made you well"

Lent is a time when we commit ourselves to this deepening process; prayer fasting almsgiving are the practices which assist us in becoming more intentionally faithful and more aware of the presence of God in our lives.

The paradox, returning to the story and our journeys, is that we are not a people acquainted with the value of emptiness.

The seeker sought meaning of life. Something we all long for. But the meaning of our lives lies in our covenant with the God in whom we have faith.

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Doctrine and creeds are useful and interesting and help order our lives.

But awe and wonder and mystery call us to faith. they precede faith when there is no other explanation. when facts are no longer helpful. information not transforming.

Let's think about that though for a moment. Whether it is the story of the tea pouring or the realization of an empty tomb, there might be something to this process known as kenosis or self emptying in order to allow the sacred to enter in and indwell us.

This faith journey started with no room at the inn and ended with an empty tomb. no room as we know it in physical space.

Our journey in this lifetime and in salvation history is one of epiphanies which often occur in the midst of desolation and desolation is often the state of no room or no vision or too much or overwhelmingness.

From Advent to today we have learned that we walk by faith and grace, guided by some light, but often in shadow. We are being pulled toward Jerusalem in hope of witnessing, no experiencing, the Resurrection. And the Resurrection is known because of an empty tomb, filled with not one piece of a body, but filled with the fullness of divinity. the uncluttered holy of holies.

We are called to become those empty tombs in which no thing resides except God  
The Cosmic Christ lives there

We are offered the opportunity during Lent to try as best we can to empty ourselves of fear, of presuppositions, of the tendency to hedge our bets, and to try as best we can to invite and receive holiness, blessing, hope, love.

We pause because we cannot see them but when we balk, our practices will help us step over those insecurity hurdles and replace them with stepping stones of prayer.

So I invite you to start unpacking...

Perhaps to do so you need to pray about what needs to lighten your baggage

Perhaps you need to offer the clutter or distraction up to God

Perhaps you come to Jesus with your burdens for He is able to bear them.

I Invite you to practice this unbearable lightness of being that you might arrive at the cross able to bear the sorrow and the resurrection at once

Note: Story of woman seeker told by Barbara Brown Taylor