

**Lent 1 2018**  
**Genesis 9 and Mark 1**

And so we begin. This time of Lent, this waiting, walking time is not for the faint of heart. It is both a blessing and a curse, and it will take us to places we'd rather not go  
It will show us that we are already there, in those places.

Places of temptation, fear, denial, betrayal,  
it will show us ourselves. At our most fragile, most needy and broken. It will break your heart.

At the same time, if we are brave enough to open ourselves to these things,  
if we take a deep breath, and so activate the inner mystery and miracle of our hearts  
take that deep life giving, life kick starting breath  
and look squarely, clearly, fearlessly at the things that wound us  
we'll be brought to a wholeness of being that has always been there  
waiting. A promise, an inheritance. A covenant.

We've chosen as the them image and concept for this season...we've chosen the heart.

The season began with Ash Wednesday, (which was, coincidentally...or not....Valentine's day) when one of the readings was from the prophet Joel:

*"Even now. says God, return to me with all your heart"*

*and Psalm 51: "Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me"*

*and from Matthew 6: "For where your treasure lies, there will your heart be also"*

***And through the season we'll read about a series of covenants where*** God, like a lover, offers her heart to us...I'll be your God and you be my people, he says over and over and over....a Biblical valentine

And finally on the Sunday just before Palm Sunday, we'll hear Jeremiah say that one day we won't need any of this written down. We won't need rules and scrolls and books and studies because we'll know. We'll know God. We'll know because it will be written - where? On our hearts. We'll know love by heart.

So ....the theme sort of begged to be lifted up.

As a worship committee as we began working with the theme we discovered that in the Hebrew culture and language, "the Heart" means the wholeness of a person.

In our culture and language, we say "the heart" and we mean the emotions. And we play that off against the head. "Do you lead with your head or your heart?" Like that.

But for the Hebrew culture, the heart is the seat of the will. The centre of the intellect. The place of emotions. All of that together. Our minds. Our wills, Our emotions.

All of that together is the heart of a person.  
The centre, the essence, the core of a human being. The heart.  
What I invite you to do this Lenten season is...

to let your heart be touched and changed and formed by this sacred story. Formed and reformed by what we know about Jesus; not only his death, but his life.

To expose yourself to this story, to let it form and reform you, is the work of a lifetime. To exercise your heart...to strengthen your faith, build and tear down and rebuild your beliefs, your endurance, and your tolerance for questions and ambiguity and the unexpected....this takes work.

It's like working out physically, If you're in shape, if you work at your body's strength and endurance, your cardio capacity and all that stuff...then when you get sick or have an accident, you have a better chance of healing quickly.

Same for spiritual things. If you don't ever do any study, ask the hard questions, develop any spiritual practice...if you don't work at it, then when the time comes when something happens and you're crushed; your heart is broken.....you're starting from a bad place....you don't have the stamina, the tools, the core strength, the habits of the heart that will keep you stable, help you heal and endure.

I'm asking you to start today. Or continue, today. To work with these texts and let them get into you, with all their quirks and questions....let these texts strengthen your heart. Build up your endurance and stamina spiritually, so that when the inevitable Lenten things happen, and they will....temptation, fear, the betrayal of a friend, the experience of feeling abandoned by God....when those things happen, when your heart is broken, you'll have a chance. Let these texts form and reform and strengthen you this season.

I invite you, as it were, to cross your heart.

The text always, for Lent 1, is the temptation of Jesus. Today, year B, we also get this delicious reading from Genesis...the first of the recorded covenants - God's love, God's valentine, God's love promise to the world, sealed with a rainbow. It just doesn't get better than this reading. It's by the P author..the priestly author, if you're interested in such things....written during the exile. You can tell, sort of, because the priestly author loves the number 7. Seven times in this passage the word covenant is used. Seven times it's stressed that this covenant is for all flesh, all the earth, every living creature. It's beautifully, artfully, written.

#### READ IT AGAIN

In contrast, Mark's account of the temptation of Jesus is spare. As bare bones and basic as was, I imagine, the life in that arid wilderness.

No extra details as garnish. Just this.

#### READ THE VERSE

So there are two readings today. How can they form us? Imprint themselves on our hearts, mold us as people, our minds, our wills, our emotions, our actions?

Mark is maddeningly, invitingly, silent about the details of the temptation. It's Matthew who later expands with quite some detail, but let's stay here with this arid, slender account.

He was in the wilderness 40 days. Tempted by Satan. He was with the wild beasts. And the angels waited on him.

#### REPEAT

I don't know what your experience of temptation is, and where, in your own heart, this text flutters, and nests and finds a home...  
but I know that if you are honest, you know you encounter temptation. Daily.

We could talk about personal temptations, and this week I've had conversations with quite a few of you about just that.  
We could talk about temptations in society, and I think we will, before Lent is over

But today I want to talk about temptations in the church. I want to talk about that because right after this service is over, we're going downstairs and we're going to meet and look at the budget and think and pray about our church and what it is to be faithful at this time in our church's life.

Especially now, maybe always, but especially now, it seems to me, there is a real sense of being in the wilderness – and of being tempted.

I'm going to speak more about this in Sundays to come, and downstairs after church ...so for now I will say three things:

First: The church as we have known it in our generation, is dying. The church as we know it now, will not survive another generation. Churches are closing at a rate of two per week. TWO. PER. WEEK.  
There is no magic wand that can change this. Whitehorse United Church – this number of people, this building....won't survive one more generation.

Second: Once that reality sinks in...really sinks in.... this is truly a wilderness. We're unclear what will happen. It's raining and when the flood stops and we step out of the ark, we have no idea what the world will look like.

And....as with Jesus, the wilderness can be a place of fear and deprivation OR it can be a place of renewal, driving us back to basics, and a place where we discover the unity of heaven and nature, including our own.

Third: There are temptations in this wilderness. We could be tempted to just hide our head in the desert sand, as it were, pretend it's all going to be ok, the young people will return....whatever it is we say to ourselves in that way....we can do that , and react to crises as they arise, and always be trying to catch up to what's happening

We could be tempted to despair, to hunker down and blame people...it all started when hockey practices were scheduled for Sundays...or when they took the Lord's prayer out of the schools or....fill in the blank. Blame.

We could be tempted to turn inward and invest all our energy and passion on just keeping this place open. That would include things like more fundraisers, with fewer and fewer people to organize and help with them.... raising the rent, cutting back on keeping the building up, charging for weddings and funerals, directing funds that would have gone to missions and outreach, redirecting those to paying the light bill.

Those are all temptations in this wilderness.

Will we succumb to them? That remains to be seen.

What I know for sure is this: I know in my heart, in the deepest part of me, that temptation, personal and ecclesiastical, is real. The temptations are out there. And they sound very reasonable you know. Most of the time the tempter's voice sounds reasonable, and even faithful. The temptations are real. We ought to know they're coming and be ready for them.

I also know in my heart, that in this one verse account, as well as in the story of the rainbow covenant, is a call away from those; a call to a wholeness and a vision that will be our salvation.

Here is Jesus. In the wilderness. Still dripping from the Jordan, having heard the voice saying You are my son; the beloved. With you I am well pleased....having seen the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending, like a dove, on him...

fresh from all that  
now out in the wilderness.

Are those two opposite things? A moment of glory in the Jordan and then a horrible experience of being alone in the wilderness? Is it like that? OR>>>> Is this for him an extension of his baptism experience.... a place of deepening, a place of regeneration, .

Does he feel deprived there, or... more clearly, more basically, truly himself?

It says "he was in the wilderness 40 days, tempted by Satan  
He was with the wild animals, and the angels waited on him"  
What if the animals were a blessing, what if in the poetry of this it's one line  
"in the wilderness, tempted by Satan"  
And another balancing line  
"with the wild animals, and angels waited on him"

Know what I mean? You know that line from the Christmas carol "let heaven and nature sing"? There's heaven and nature right there in the wilderness. I think it was a blessing. The wild animals. The Angels. Maybe they are the same thing.

ANYWAY...

What I'm suggesting is that this scene in the wilderness...

Jesus, with nature, and with the angels...

This is a snapshot of what the covenant with Noah is all about. This is the wholeness, the promise to all flesh, all creation, right there. The wholeness of being that the idea of the heart offers? This is it right there.

This is the wholeness that will be our light, our life, our hope and in the end our salvation. This unity ...the human one, the animals, the angels...all in the wilderness together as Jesus makes a decision and creation hangs in the balance

Heaven and nature bear witness and come to his aid.

All disciplines that I know of, science, philosophy, physics,.....bear witness to this: that when humans wrestle with and then live the wholeness for which we're created....live the rainbow promise, live the unity of all flesh..

When we go to the wilderness, confront the demons, and then come out on fire for the promise...

When we do that, nature and the heavens WILL COME TO OUR AID. We're not alone in this

And even when we're in the wilderness, and the demons are real and we don't know what's going to happen from day to day, never mind year to year..

When we're in the wilderness

And if we're alert, if we let the wilderness be our teacher, our gift

There will be a rainbow, and we will be accompanied. Heaven and nature will conspire to sustain us and bring us back to ourselves.

We're moving into Lent and a journey that will call us to go to deep places. At the times when you are alone and afraid, when the future is uncertain and the wilderness threatens to overwhelm you, May you stand in the shadow of a rainbow, and out of the corner of your eye, may you glimpse the wild beasts, and the flutter of angel wings

And hear the echo of a voice saying

You are my child. My beloved.

And may you rise to face a new world

With all your heart.

Amen