



Sermon by the Right Reverend John R. Stephens

Lent 2

Year C

March 13, 2022

Episcopal Visit to St. Martin, North Vancouver

It is good to be here with you at St. Martin's this morning. I am very grateful for the very fine ministry that has taken place in this parish over 110 years. These last two years of living in a pandemic have been challenging here and, in all churches, as we have all wrestled with how to be in community for worship while not always being able to be together. Thank you for all that you have done and continue to do for one another and in this neighbourhood in response to the gospel. I know that you are considering what the future now holds and may you be guided by the Holy Spirit in your discernment. I am also grateful for the ministry of the Reverend Mark Munn. He has been with you for just a little while, but I know you appreciate his gifts, guidance, and pastoral care. It is good to be with you.

I wanted to begin this sermon by reflecting a little bit on the season of Lent. It seems a good place to start as this is only the second Sunday in this purple-clad season and if you have not already spent some time reflecting on how this time might just be the kick-start that you need for your faith-life it is never too late to do that.

In the Book of Alternative Services liturgy for Ash Wednesday, the description and invitation for the season of Lent is centred on self-examination, penitence, prayer, fasting, almsgiving, and reading and meditating on the word of God. And if you can do all of this throughout all of Lent, I applaud and encourage you. But if this seems too far removed from what you can manage... if this seems like the scorecard for the ultimate Christian and you are still using training wheels that is OK. How do you enter the season with integrity, and with an openness to hearing the voice of God? How do you mark this time as different from the rest of the year?

Now for many of us, the past two years or so of being in a pandemic and deprived of many of the joys of life, we might have felt like we have already been living an extended time of Lent. We have had enough of the solitude and wilderness and separation from people and community and taking on the season of Lent full-bore seems a little too much. And I hear you on that. But Lent is not simply a time of depriving ourselves of some of the pleasures of life but is about deepening our connection with the One who calls us beloved; the One who is constantly inviting us to draw nearer and to stop making life so complicated. I think it is important to see this time as a pilgrimage not a sprint to some imaginary finish line, a segment of the road on which we walk with God not the entire path, an opportunity to dig much deeper into the discovery of the expansive presence of God in our lives but not having to have all the answers. And this is important.

Joan Chittister phrases it this way: “Lent is a call to renew a commitment grown dull, perhaps by a life more marked by routine than by reflection. After a lifetime of mundane regularity or unconsidered adherence to the trappings of faith, Lent requires me, as a Christian, to stop for a while, to reflect again on what is going on in me. I am challenged again to decide whether I, myself, do truly believe that Jesus is the Christ—and if I believe, whether I will live accordingly when I can no longer hear the song of angels in my life and the star of Bethlehem has grown dim for me.”¹

And so for some of us at this time we will give up on chocolate bars, or desserts or alcohol or social media. Others will offer to give more to charities, to those who are homeless or the addicted or the lonely or the frail or the forgotten ones. Others will commit to a new routine of prayer or Christian formation or Bible study or attending worship. These are all important ways to mark this season but at the root of what you choose to do should be an examination of those things that block how you want to live into a deepening of your Christian faith, those things that get in the way of deepening of your trust in God’s grace, those words or voices that seem to be louder than the words at Jesus’ baptism that carried him into the wilderness which said, You are my beloved, with you I am well pleased.

The gospel reading for this day was a little bit strange in some ways and seems to have little to do with this time of Lent. I sat with it for a fair bit this week. It began with a warning to Jesus: “Get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you.” With the backdrop of the horrific news coming from Ukraine and invasion and bombing and terror there, these words seem a lot more troubling. A war that seems to have no basis and yet it rages on as

¹ Joan Chittister in *The Liturgical Year* page 111

the rest of world watches in shock. As we pray for the people of Ukraine, I am struck by the parallel of Herod trying to kill Jesus and this Russian invasion trying to destroy the freedoms and democracy of Ukraine. For similar questions arise. What was Herod trying to kill in Jesus do you think? What was the threat to Herod? What was it that Herod needed to destroy? Was it the threat to his power? The threat to his riches? The threat of Jesus' wisdom? The disturbing words that Jesus uttered of Blessed are the poor, or of a prodigal son or a good Samaritan or even love your neighbour as yourself? What was it that troubled Herod so much? How did the words of Jesus touch a nerve in Herod? Did they bother him, keep him up at night, disturb his comfortable world? For I wonder if Herod feared that this Jesus could see who Herod truly was, the true self: the darkness, the fear, the self-doubts; that the hidden self would be brought to the light.

Let me ask you. What are the things that block you living into the life abundant? Of recognizing that God is calling us to more, much more.

The final phrase of the gospel also struck me. It made me sit up and notice the image of what Jesus prays for us and all those on the pilgrimage of Lent. Maybe even what Jesus hopes might escape our lips a little more frequently. The words were "You will not see me until the time comes when you say, 'Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.'" Now we might just assume that this is referring to Palm Sunday and Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem. But I would want to take it much further. Where are those moments when we might utter "Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord?" In our liturgy it comes in the Eucharistic Prayer, at the centre of our worship drawing attention that once more Christ comes to us. But there are also other times where we might notice, Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord: those risking their lives for peace in this world, those who care for the refugees, those who show the power of love over the power of hate, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, those who want to change how we waste and destroy this planet, those who are salt and light in this world. Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord."

Michele DeRusha writes this: "I learned over the weeks and months of sitting in nature in quiet solitude that I am a lot like the oak tree that clings so fiercely to its leaves. I suspect a lot of us are. We, too, clutch our camouflage—the person we present to the world, to our own selves, and even to God. We, too, are unwilling to shed our false selves, to let go, to live vulnerably and authentically.... Sitting in silence every day helped me see that my 'leaves' of choice are busyness and productivity, drive and efficiency, achievement and success... I clung with an iron grip to my false self, to the false identity I'd meticulously crafted over the years. I was busy, productive, and driven. I pushed myself to accomplish, achieve, and succeed. ...

The truth is, God does not wish for us to stand stubborn like the autumn oak tree, cloaked in a façade of protection, our truest, most authentic selves obscured beneath a tangled bramble of false security. Rather God desires us to live with our true essence revealed and flourishing, our true self front and centre, secure and thriving. God yearns for us to live wholeheartedly and truthfully as the unique, beautiful, beloved individuals God created us to be. Most of all, God's deepest desire is for us to know God, to root our whole selves in

God like a tree rooted by a stream and to know God's deep, abiding love for us... God invites us into intimate relationship... so that we may then live more compassionately and intimately with those around us."²

I began this sermon inviting you to look a little more carefully at this season of Lent. How can you use this time to push aside all the things that block God's gentle whisper to draw closer? For Lent is a time to time to think seriously about who Jesus is for us... and who we are in response to him. To consider what grace and love and forgiveness mean in terms of how we live in this world. To consider our response to the empty tomb of Easter which continues to say to us: Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord. May that be true of us as we make our way through this holy Lent.

² Michelle DeRusha, *True You: Letting Go of Your False Self to Uncover the Person God Created* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2019), pages 15-19 and 216