

Feb 10, 2008

First Sunday of Lent

Title: Going Green

Text: The Trees in the woods will shout for joy. Psalm 96
Jesus Calls the Fishermen. Matthew 4:18-22

Prayer: Dear Creator, Your whole universe is vibrating with life. It calls us to see and hear and sense - to wonder and to praise. May we enter into your courts of nature and praise your holy presence here. Amen.

It's the beginning of Lent. We know this time of the church year as a journey - a journey we take walking along side Jesus as he teaches, preaches and heals his way to Jerusalem.

So, how did we get here? A carbon fast for Lent.

Way back at the beginning of Jesus' ministry he calls out to the fisherman Peter and his brother Andrew and their buddies - James and John. The big offer he makes to those men down by the lake shore: "I will teach you to catch, not fish, but people." All kinds of people - hard working people like yourselves, like your sisters and brothers, people who have jobs as teachers, soldiers, shop keepers, care takers, people who live alone, people who have no family, people who can't afford medical treatment, people who come from different countries, who speak other languages, who worship other gods. "Come, follow me." he said. And they did.

As any beginners they were eager to learn the skills needed, the language and routines of their new 'job.' So, they listened carefully to his early preaching: First came the sermon on the mount. This was followed by teachings about the law, anger, revenge and love your enemies. This was all so new to those fisherman they had a hard time wrapping their minds around the big concepts like: Blessed are those who are spiritually empty. Blessed are those who are sad over the loss of a loved one. Blessed are those who work for peace in their family, in their town, between groups of people who don't like each other. He preached to "turn the other cheek" and "pray for your enemies." Peter, James and John felt stretched to the limits. What did all this mean? Where was Jesus taking them with this kind of message.

So, it came as a great relief to the fishermen when Jesus started talking about things that were familiar like the topic of religious duties. Jesus taught them that there are three religious duties that he expected them to practice.

Only three! First is Charity - giving money to the poor and those in need. Second is Prayer - and he taught them the Lord's Prayer. And third - fasting.

Well, we know about charity and the practice of giving - we're really good at that, mostly. And prayer is very much a part of our church life and home life. But, fasting - that is something we don't practice very much around here. That's something the Catholics do. Some of us have the practice of giving something up during Lent like not eating meat, giving up candy, or some other favorite indulgence.

Why should we give up a favorite food or some other kind of physical enjoyment? Here is one definition of fasting: "By refraining from such basic physical indulgence, one can more greatly appreciate the dependence we human beings have on God which leads to a greater sense of gratitude." Spiritually speaking, the practice of fasting becomes a reminder of God's abundant generosity in our own lives.

Traditionally, during Lent, our church has embraced the spiritual practice of charity. We have had Lenten giving programs for Heifer International, Neighbors Helping Neighbors and last year, the Back Bay Mission Trip. This year we are entering into the ‘unknown spiritual territory’ of fasting.

Ta! Da! Our Lenten Carbon Fast. We invite you to give up some of your physical enjoyments like excessive heat by turning the thermostat down 3 degrees, or using energy saving light bulbs, or taking fewer trips to town, or car pooling to church. And may other ways listed on the calendar you have.

In 2004 at the Parliament of the World’s Religions meeting three representatives from the Native American tribes of Alaska told the delegates, “Our people have lived near the polar ice cap for several thousand years. After many generations we must tell you we are deeply concerned. Where our parents once stood on ice is now water. Everywhere we look the polar ice cap is melting.”

There are more and more stories like this as well as scientific evidence of God’s green earth in great endanger. Global warming is taking place. There are practical and easy ways we can make a difference. To fast is to practice new habits of behavior. And, in the process of our Lenten carbon fast we can connect to the wonder and beauty of God’s creation.

How we see the world plays a major role in how we develop relationships, treat each other and care for the earth. In the time of Jesus and for years to come the world was viewed as a three teared universe that was flat with fall-off edges.

Heaven above, earth in the middle and hell below. The age of science and the Enlightenment presented a different view of the world. This view can be described as a big working machine with many parts.

There has been great competition: who could build bigger machines, better medicines, faster transportation, more powerful armies, and where would we find the next oil well. In the process parts became disposable, people became nameless and the green earth became full of hazardest waste.

In 1965 the British scientist James Lovelock said the world doesn’t work like a machine. Instead, he said, the world we live in is like a living, pulsating organism - no separate parts and pieces, but the whole universe as one body. In this view, everything emerges from the same source, life is something to be shared. This is know as the Gaia Hypothesis which presents the earth as a single living entity, with all parts interdependent on one another.

Until recently the holiness of the earth has been largely forgotten. The land became mere real estate, and the animals and trees simply resources to be used for our benefit. However, this attitude of “use it up and throw it away” is changing as we view the world as a single living organism.

“In the beginning God created heaven and earth, sea and land, animals and trees, human beings, male and female. And God said, “It is good.”

With this new, yet ancient, view of the world we are permanently connected to each other and to all of creation. Each personal choice carries a global consequence. Each sunrise becomes the joy of new hope. Each time we hear a bird sing it reminds us of what we love rather than what we fear. Each time we look at a tree we see ourselves.

Fredrick Buechner describes an ordinary drive:

Suddenly, I started noticing the trees. They were in full summer foliage. They were greener than I think I have ever seen trees before. The sun was in them. The air was stirring them. The branches were heavy with leaves. As I drove by, they waved at me. It was the wind, of course, that made them wave. It was the air whipped up by my car streaking by at 65 miles per hour. But no matter. They waved in the only

way trees have of waving and caught my attention so completely that all other thoughts vanished from my head.

I didn't think about them. I just saw them. I didn't put words to what was happening. I just let it happen. It was a rare and precious drive as long as it lasted. It was only when I got where I was going that I found myself putting words to it at last.

The trees are always so glad to see us - those were the words I put to it. I'd never noticed that before. They waved their branches like flags in a parade, hailing me as I passed by as though I were some mighty spirit. They looked as if they had lined up for miles along the highway to greet me. At the risk of seeming hopelessly eccentric, I confess that, after a while, I found myself waving back at them every once in a while, as if they too, were mighty spirits and I was greeting them. It was the whole of me that waved to the whole of them. It was Almighty God who had formed and given life to us both. The trees waved their holy branches at my holiness. I waved my holy hand at theirs.

From the book of Psalms written so long ago comes this song of praise:

Sing a new song to the Lord! Sing to the Lord, all the world!
Be glad, earth and sky! Roar, sea and every creature in you;
Be glad, fields and everything in you! The trees in the woods will shout for joy.

Today you are invited to make a Lenten commitment to enter into the spiritual practice of fasting. By giving up some of our use of non-renewal energy we will reduce the amount of carbon dioxide that is put into the atmosphere.

And when we do this surely the earth and sky sing a new song, the sea will roar with gladness and the fields will shout for joy. And maybe the trees will wave their holy branches as you go by. Amen.