

Lent I, February 18, 2018

The Path, Chapter 16

ECOHS, Cumming, GA

Good morning! This first Sunday of Lent, ***I bring you glad tidings of great joy!*** That may feel like the wrong mood for the Lenten season and for the current events we face in our world today—school shootings and political gridlock and so much more.

But in the midst of our sorrow and sin, we have a Savior who loves us and comforts us and calls us to repent. The primary way that happens is when we turn to Scripture and the Spirit blows through those holy words to make them come alive in our hearts so we can make them come alive in God's world.

So these past several months we have been reading *The Path* as a congregation as a way to learn Scripture better. It is a narrative summary of the stories of Scripture. If we read chapter 16 of *The Path* this past week, we heard all of the beginning stories of Jesus' life according to the different Gospels.

We may have found these readings as a strange juxtaposition with the season of Lent and today's gospel of the Temptation of Christ in the wilderness. But in all of these readings, we find good news of hope that comes uniquely from Jesus.

As you know, each of the four canonical gospels records the life of Jesus a little differently. This is especially true of how each begins his story. Matthew and Luke's Gospel give us most of the details that we remember in our pageants and liturgy—angels and stables and wise men and the Holy Family.

Both Mark and John's Gospels begin very differently. Mark has a very abrupt beginning. John the Baptist shows up without much explanation. Then Jesus shows up and is baptized and goes out into the wilderness-- and then off we go! John begins with what we heard in part in the first lesson today—a hymn to the eternal preexistence of $\Lambda\omicron\gamma\omicron\varsigma$, the Word, the essence of God, God who became human in Jesus.

I chose the passage from John as our first lesson today. And as an aside, Bonnie and I have decided to use two Gospel lessons—one selected from *The Path* and the one appointed from the lectionary—as our way to cover both during these next few weeks of Lent. Think of it as a double dose of Jesus. That approach seemed best to both of us.

The portion we heard today from John is read on Christmas Day. But like all Scripture, it is something to hear and remember all year. One verse in today's passage stands out to me. It is language that we hear so often in church that we may become immune to its power. In the NRSV that we use in church, the verse reads "The Word became flesh and lived among us." In other words, God became human in Jesus. That is a core belief of the Church. But in the literal

Greek, it reads, “The Word pitched his tent among us.” That is a memorable way to think about Jesus and his time on earth.

First, it has echoes of the story of Israel in the wilderness as they moved through the desert with the Tabernacle, a tent-like structure that contained the Ark of the Covenant. God was with them in a tent back then, too. So that is the way that John described the Word’s journey among the human race in the world that he created. The Word was camping with us.

Now let’s fast forward and use our holy imagination to see what it would be like if Jesus pitched a tent among us today. Where might Jesus show up? How might he stir things up and bring “grace and truth” to us as John’s Gospel reports? Because that is what Jesus did— and continues to do—he disrupts our lives and challenges our limitations and assumptions so that we can grow up by faith and be more like him.

So if tomorrow morning I were to walk out of the front door of my home and see some stranger setting up a tent on the lawn, how do you think I would respond? I imagine I might be startled. Perhaps angry or scared. Depending how big he was, I might shoo the man away or if he was too big, I might call the police. If I were having a better day, I might walk up to the man and introduce myself to him. I might ask (in a friendly way), “What’s up?”

Imagine that this stranger was Jesus. Being Jesus, he might say something like this: “Keith, I want to spend some time with you so we can get to know each other.” I imagine, even on a good day, I would be thrown off by that. How about you?

Now the image of the Word joining our lives, camping with us, so to speak, is deeper and broader than our individual experience. Jesus became one of us to help all of us better understand God’s plan for being human. That’s part of what Lent is about—remembering God’s plan and repenting of our own so we can live out God’s plan and become more like Jesus.

In today’s world, I can imagine Jesus showing up in some awkward places and camping out. In my mischievous imagination, I can see Jesus showing up at a protest. It could be about any number of issues—immigration, gun violence, the racial divide. I see Jesus inviting people to leave their different camps where everybody thinks the same way and gets angry about the same things and instead have them join him for a meal at his campsite.

Perhaps he would invite a man with a MAGA cap. Then invite another man with dreadlocks and a “Black Lives Matter” t-shirt. Perhaps one more with product in his hair and a pressed polo shirt. Then he might invite a woman from the Junior League and another with a pink cap from the Women’s March and another woman working two jobs to support her family.

I think Jesus would serve a common meal to them and ask questions that would get to deeper issues than slogans and superficial anger. Jesus being Jesus would tend to get to the heart of the matter, which often involves our hopes and fears. He would offer “grace and truth” to those who would listen to him and believe. I imagine at least some of them would leave his camp site and walk away.

That exact camping scene may never happen in this life. But something similar does happen every day all around the world. You see, as Christians we believe that Jesus shows up when two or three of us get together to pray in his name. That's his promise. And if we believe that, we need to pay attention to him when we gather. If we do, then we can experience the grace and truth of Jesus with those who gather with us. His grace and truth transforms us—at least those of us who are willing to listen and believe.

In a fifteen minute sermon, no preacher can offer a solution to the pressing problems of today—immigration, gun violence, the racial divide; and a long list of other problems. I wish I could. The issues are too complex and the emotions are too deep.

But here is what I can proclaim to you with confidence—the Word continues to pitch his tent among us and calls us to invite people to our campsite—to this place, this church, and others like it all around the world. Through love and prayer and listening-- and frankly some hard work-- we can help bring the grace and truth of Jesus to our world, a world that so desperately needs it.

That does not mean we need to give up our opinions. We do not have to become a bleeding heart liberal or a nice, "bless your heart" Southerner (not that there is anything wrong with either). Jesus called two of his disciples, James and John, "Sons of Thunder," so I think he is used to being around loud and even obnoxious people. We can come to his campsite just as we are.

But after we come, we need to realize that Jesus will start to stir things up. He will teach us to listen to the opinions—and hearts-- of others, even if we radically disagree with them. Jesus will teach us to respect the dignity of every human being—that is what we promise to do in our Baptismal covenant.

Jesus sees behind our arguments and sees the deeper truth that we often miss. One side may be more right or wrong than the other on a particular issue. Or both sides may be wrong! But **all** of us and our human opinions are incomplete. If we do not pray together, and listen to Scripture together, and listen to and respect others, there is no way we can learn and grow as the people of this land—and as people of faith.

Earlier this week, I was walking to my car and I saw a bumper sticker. You know, reading bumper stickers can be dangerous—some can make your blood pressure go up! This one had a Confederate flag on it, which I am pretty used to seeing. I normally expect to see some banal phrase like "Heritage not Hate." But this one had these words—"Fighting terrorists since 1861."

Now if Jesus invited me to his campsite to share a meal with the driver of that truck, would I go? Since I have promised to follow Jesus as my Lord, I'd like to think I would. And assuming I did, the conversation Jesus guided us in may surprise me. I won't presume to speak about the heart of that truck owner. Jesus knows it. And knowing Jesus, I imagine he might

focus my attention on what is in my heart—judgment, anger. And I know what Jesus thinks about those things. I imagine I would need to repent and learn and grow as a follower of Jesus.

So during this holy season of Lent, I invite us all to go camping with Jesus. It is a lot more challenging than giving up chocolate or coffee. A lot more. It involves prayer, and reading and reflecting on Scripture, and repentance. It may involve being with someone who is very different from us—and actually listening to them. I promise, with God's help, that I will do that. I invite us all to do that, too, as we keep a holy Lent. Amen.