

3/10/2019

“God’s Generous Heart”

Scripture: Deuteronomy 26:1-11; Romans 10:8b-13

Sermon Series: With All Your Heart

Theme: From God’s generous heart we receive goodness and mercy, and an abundance of life to share with others

Today is the First Sunday in the Season of Lent, which began last Wednesday. As you may know, Lent is the forty day period leading up to the celebration of Christ’s resurrection from death, with special emphasis on the forty days which Jesus spent in the wilderness, in fasting and prayer, faced with temptation from the devil, before his earthly ministry began. It is a time of self-examination, repentance of sin, and self-denial, along with focus upon God’s purpose for us and the provision of the Holy Spirit. It is therefore also a time of sharing God’s love and grace with others through acts of mercy and kindness.

As you may have read in my March newsletter message, God had declared a word of hope through the prophet Joel, to the Israelites who had wandered astray from God’s Law long before the coming of Jesus Christ. Here his words again:

“Yet even now, says the LORD, return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning; rend your hearts and not your clothing. Return to the LORD, your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and relents from punishing. Who knows whether he will not turn and relent, and leave a blessing behind him, a grain offering and a drink offering for the LORD, your God?” (2:12-14)

And so, we begin our Lenten sermon series this year . . . “With All Your Heart”.

Let me begin by saying . . .

† Even though we begin our journey into the wilderness of Lent, where our parched souls are dry and weary, we are reminded that our journey is not endless or aimless. The “promised land” lies in our rising with Christ.

In fact, Sundays are technically not included in Lent, as every Sunday is a remembrance and celebration of Christ’s victory over sin and death in the power of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

As we observe Lent this year though, we will consider our personal and collective journey through our own wilderness, with all our hearts, to the heart of God. In doing so, we will consider and learn from those who have gone before us in faith.

As we heard or read from the Book of Deuteronomy (26:1-11), we find ourselves at the border of a wilderness.

As Reverends Todd and Jennifer Pick write of it (UM Discipleship Ministries): “We are standing on the edge of the wilderness, looking with great anticipation toward the Promised Land. Just in front of us is the Jordan River Valley, where Jesus’ cousin will baptize him centuries later and God will name him (and every child of God) as Beloved. This river marks the boundary and entrance into a land flowing with God’s promise and presence. It is a sight for sore and somnolent eyes.”

Although this story from Deuteronomy contains many dominant themes that we normally connect with the season of Lent, today I want to focus on one, which you may have already guessed – wilderness.

The Reverends Pick say: “Precisely at the heart of this reading, we find a story that the Israelite people are asked to repeat over and again [that is each year] as they bring their first fruits to the priest to be consecrated. “A wandering Aramean was my ancestor . . . ” their story begins. It is a reminder that even when they have inhabited the land for such a long time that they come to the Temple with their arms laden with the fruit of their harvest, they never forget to whom the land truly belongs and the story of how they came to be. It is a story that grounds them in a tale of survival and struggle, even when (perhaps especially when) they begin to get comfortable and are tempted to forget that it is God from whom all blessings flow. These were a people who were shaped by the memory of being nomadic, rootless, and dispossessed, even as generation upon generation put down roots and settled in the land. But the rehearsed story wove them into the fabric of their past. The work of remembering the past calls for present action.”

They go on to say, “The recitation that begins with the ‘wandering Aramean’ calls to mind that at some point, at some time, we have all been hungry, rootless wanderers dependent upon one another and God for comfort, care, and for our very survival. Perhaps this has not happened in our lifetimes, but in the lifetimes of those who have come before us. But their story is our story. Their call is our call. And that call comes out of the generous heart of God. That call is to embody justice and joy.” (ibid.)

So, let me ask: What has been your life journey thus far? When have you experienced times of “wilderness wandering”? In what way or ways?

Perhaps you have experienced the loss of a loved one, a close relationship, a job. Perhaps you are dealing with health issues, be they physical, emotional, mental, spiritual, or all of the above. Maybe you have fears, anxiety, loneliness, sadness or depression.

You, or a loved one, may be struggling with addiction. You may be struggling with these, or some other kind of temptations.

You may know someone dealing with abuse of some kind. You may be wondering what the best way for you to help them is.

And, in light of the current and pending decisions within the United Methodist Church, you may be feeling like you are in a wilderness of your faith or affiliations.

And, in all of these, and other wilderness experiences, you or someone you love may be asking where God is – if there is one – in all of this?

The good news, friends, is that God is right here with us. God has not forgotten or forsaken us! And God is with all those who are wandering . . . whether willfully in sin, those dealing with hardship or illness not of their own making, or those seeking a better life, free of persecution and harm from others.

† **All may believe and receive the gifts of God’s goodness and grace alike.**
(Romans 10:11, 12b-13)

The Apostle Paul writes: *“The word is near you, on your lips and in your heart” (that is, the word of faith that we proclaim); because if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For one believes with the heart and so is justified, and one confesses with the mouth and so is saved. The scripture says, “No one who believes in him will be put to shame.” . . . **the same Lord is Lord of all and is generous to all who call on him. For, “Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.”**”*

Now this passage has the most obvious and powerful expression in being saved from sin and death through faith in Jesus Christ. And if you haven’t received it yet, I invite you to do so now. Simple say with me . . . “Lord Jesus, I repent of my sins. I invite you into my heart. I accept you as my Savior and Lord.”

If you have made this confession, I invite you to join me in prayer after the message this morning or see me after the service.

And we know that this profession of faith is not the end of our journey, but only the beginning of an even more wonderful one.

Let me just share a couple of this past week's witnesses in The Upper Room, of God's wonderful presence and generous heart.

Ron Silflow of Idaho shares from Psalm 65 . . .

"The whole earth is filled with awe at your wonders; where morning dawns, where evening fades, you call forth songs of joy." - Psalm 65:8 (NIV)

He says (3/9/19) . . . "As I turn on the barn lights and gather the cows for their early morning milking, a few sparrows begin a soft chatter in the milking-parlor rafters. They remind me of a few choir members gathering on a Sunday morning to warm up their voices. At this early hour, I start out grumpy. I love caring for the animals, but I feel lonely. The night gloom and my mundane tasks feel heavy on my soul. My focus turns to self-pity. I long for daylight. But then I notice a stunning sparrow rhythm unfold. About two hours before dawn, the bird chatter gradually swells to a soft, slow, throat-vibrating song directed heavenward. I feel invited to join. Sometimes I add my feeble songs of praise to the bird choir. Other times I just listen. I feel the icy heaviness melt, and joy and hope awaken in me. Yes, the darkness will end soon.

"Maybe, when we become keenly aware of our loneliness, our physical or relational wounds, our longing for darkness to turn to light, we can learn from the rhythms of the bird songs. Their songs reach a climax of praise during darkness to usher in the light they are expecting to come."

Yes, I too know and feel God's generous heart revealed in nature!

And, as you know, God's generous heart is often present and revealed through others.

As Lucinda J. Rollings of Indiana shares (3/8/19):

From *Psalm 18:6* she quotes, "*In my distress I cried out to the LORD; I called to my God for help. God heard my voice from his temple; I called to him for help, and my call reached his ears.*" She shares this story . . .

"My friend Virginia was overwhelmed and exhausted, having to go to work each day and also care for her husband, who was confined at home with terminal cancer. Tearfully, she would leave him each morning with his lunch and water within his reach and walk out the door with an agonizing prayer, "Lord, how am I going to do this?"

"Hearing of Virginia's dilemma, several people from our church began helping with meals. Others came to sit with her husband for a few hours each day. They would read the Bible and pray, chat, or watch TV. Virginia told us how comforting it was to know that her husband was being loved and cared for when she could not be there.

“A bit of compassion goes a long way. God had heard Virginia’s distress call and prompted her community to come to her aid. It was an opportunity for us to show God’s love as we followed the call of Christ, lightening her load. God was with Virginia and her husband during that time — perhaps most powerfully through compassionate friends and family.”

I am pleased to say we have a caring and generous congregation right here. God’s loving and generous heart is expressed every week, if not every day, in so many special ways -- both within and through this family of faith, its members, and friends. From God’s generous heart we receive goodness and mercy and an abundance of life to share with others. May it continue to be so. And if we have wandered away from God, may we return with all our hearts to the One who is generous in love and mercy!! Amen.

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Questions for Reflection:

- > **What has been your life journey thus far? When have you experienced times of “wilderness wandering”? In what way or ways?**
- > **Have you experienced God’s goodness, guidance and grace?**
- > **Have you come to know Jesus, and the gift of salvation? Have you received it in your heart? Confessed it with your mouth?**