

FROM DEATH TO LIFE: From Stone to Spirit

Fifth Sunday of Lent

March 25, 2012

Jill R. Russell

Texts: Jeremiah 31.31-34;
 Psalm 51.1-12;
 Hebrews 5.5-12;
 John 12.20-33

We began this long season of Lent with the shadow of a cross above our heads and the smear of ash upon our foreheads. We were ushered into this season on Ash Wednesday with the Words: "Remember that you are dust and to dust you will return." The season of Lent is long. Six weeks. And the work of Lent is arduous: to remember our mortality, to acknowledge our frailty, to confess our sin. Many of us mark this season with practices of self-discipline. If any of you are fasting in any form like a carbon fast or a dietary fast or a technology fast (I know people who have given up Facebook for Lent) --- round about this 5th week of Lent you are eager for this season of fasting and penitence to be done.

I wonder if you've noticed something. What began as a grey cross overhead is slowly intertwining with colors from the rainbow. Not a burst of color showing up on Easter Day but being woven throughout this season of Lent. As we were planning for Lent this year we noticed something in the texts of the season. Alongside the traditional themes of Lent - a steady call for our repentance and the recurring demand for self-denial that keeps coming back in the gospel - we also heard an equally loud strain of promise and covenant throughout these texts. If repentance means to turn around these covenant texts remind us what we'll find with that about-face: the always faithful, never ending love of God that does not let us go.

I almost wondered if the weather somehow got our worship planning memo. The unexpected bursts of light and warmth and color in creation have added to the disorientation of the season in a most wonderful way. Typically, the disorienting message of Lent is the gospel insistence that in order to have life – abundant life – we must first die. Death to life....that

isn't the typical order of things (we live and *then* we die) but that is the logic of the gospel. And so Lent becomes a time to focus on the parts of us that need to be put to death in order to receive and step into the life Christ has come to give. So in that spirit some people use Lent to give up their habit of worry or to turn over anxiety or to work at forgiveness or to become more conscious of the environment.

To those who have become acclimated to the rhythms of the church year and recognize in them the core teachings of the gospel you expect a grey cross overhead in worship and it feels right that Lent falls in the end of winter and the early parts of Spring where it is typically cold, and grey, and rainy outside. All of that goes together with the work of this season: the parable that Jesus gives today in the gospel of John about the grain of wheat that falls into the earth and dies before it can bear fruit. We're used to that kind of message in Lent and used to that sort of tone for worship. It's been a different kind of disorientation to walk through this season with weekly reminders of God's faithful love, with color weaving its way into our worship space and flowers blooming all around us or with a song like "Be Ye Glad" in the center of our worship today.

Being disoriented is a good thing especially if it pokes holes in our assumption that our life of faith and walk with God is some linear, predictable, upward climb. "Six weeks to die to self. Let all of our destructive, self-defeating habits go in one fell swoop and now we're good. Resurrection, new life - here we come!" I suspect Jesus was intentional in drawing from the rhythm of nature (a rhythm that comes round every year) to describe the process of death leading to life. It's not a onetime deal. It's a lifetime deal. And if we think we can get a handle on it with a few weeks of self-discipline we are in for some real disillusionment.

This isn't about moral purity or ethical excellence; something we can achieve of our own will and accomplishment. Generation after generation has proven how futile that effort is. What God is doing with us is something different, something deeper, than the moral ledger balance we keep running in our head. God is writing a covenant on our hearts reconnecting us to God heart to heart. I read this week that the Latin root

for *religion* can mean tying together again.¹ That's what this season is for. That is what God seeks to do with us: to tie us together again.

But to do that we have to first acknowledge the places where we've come untied and what is standing in the way of being tied back together. That's where the practices and disciplines of Lent come into play. Not as an effort of our own achievement but a way of listening for where we have lost our bearing and drifted away the Source of our life. I came across a little book called *Living Lent* a few years ago. The author, Barbara Cawthorne Crafton, does a wonderful job in her first meditation of describing how the practices of Lent can become an opportunity for letting God tie us back together. I share an excerpt of it with you here:

“We didn't even know what moderation was. What it felt like. We didn't just work: We inhaled our jobs, sucked them in, *became* them... We didn't just eat: We stuffed our selves. We gained only three pounds since the previous year, we told ourselves. Three pounds is not a lot. We had gained that much in each of the twenty-five years since high school. We did not do the math.... We felt that it was important to be good to ourselves, and that this meant that it was dangerous to tell ourselves no. About anything, ever. Repression of one's desires is an unhealthy thing.... There were times, coming into the house from work or waking early when all was quiet, when we felt uneasy about the sense of entitlement that characterized all our days. When we wondered if the mad slalom between fevered overwork and excess of appetite were not two sides of the same coin... When did the collision between our appetites and the needs of our souls happen? Was there a heart attack? Did we get laid off from work? Did a beloved child become a bored stranger, a marriage fall silent and cold? Or, by some exquisite working of God's grace, did we just find the courage to look the truth in the eye and, for once, not blink? How did we come to know that we were dying a slow and unacknowledged death? And that the only way back to life was to set all our packages down and begin again, carrying with us only what we really needed? We travail. We are heavy laden. Refresh us, O

¹ F. Dean Lueking, “Living by the Word”, *Christian Century*, March 21, 2012, pg. 20.

homeless, jobless, possession less Savior. You came naked, and naked you go. And so it is for us. So it is for all of us.”²

There are parts of us that need to die: attitudes that we hold, habits that we have, ways of thinking and ways of being. At first that dying to self can seem so painful...you can feel the wrenching pain in the voice of the psalmist from today – can't you? I know that some of us are knee deep in that process of dying right now. But it is also true that as we trust God enough to let go of what the world has taught us to value and take up instead what Jesus has taught, we discover that new life is truly possible and grace can be found all along the way. Not just on the other side when life feels whole again but even in the *midst* of the struggle there are these little bursts of color, little patches of warmth, little signs of life.

This table is one such sign. Jesus sets this table before us wherever we find ourselves today: skeptical, weary, hopeful. This is a place where God's Spirit meets with our spirit and ties us back together.

The table is set. Let us prepare our hearts to come to the feast.

² Barbara Cawthorne Crafton, *Living Lent: Meditations for These Forty Days* (Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse Publishing, 1998), 1-4.