

Lent 3 – Year C

I had an Epiphany this past week – yes, an Epiphany during Lent! It was not one of those “glorious” moments of sweetness and light, though. It was the shining of a glaring light that revealed something I needed to address. It was definitely an “aha” experience – and it was about repentance.

I have talked before about the call Jesus gives us to repent – that it is not so much about wallowing in sorrow for our “sins” – but about a turning, about a change in how we look at things, a change in perspective. That is the kind of repentance that was visited upon me this week.

I went to the monthly meeting of the Mt. Pleasant Area Diversity Group Thursday evening. I was going to be a “presence” – to support Joyce Baugh and Norma Bailey and the group of students they led on a pilgrimage of sorts through some of the major sites of the Civil Rights Movement in the south. They spoke of various museums and centers in Montgomery and Birmingham, the marches, the bombing of the 16th Street Baptist Church, the lynchings. We had just seen the film *Selma* on Sunday as part of the Lenten film series, so I was attuned to and moved by all the suffering that the students’ walk through history had encompassed. At one point, I heard myself saying inside: “What incredible suffering these people – African-Americans – have endured, and still face.” And then came the epiphany. Another voice inside said, “Until you can say, ‘What incredible suffering we have endured and still face..’ you don’t get it.” Until I change my perspective – until I change where I am standing, so that you are no longer “other” to me but part of my “We” – I am not living in the kingdom, the way of God. Because in God’s realm, there is no “Them.” In God’s kingdom, there is no separation. In God’s heart, all things are restored to unity in Christ.

We prayed in today’s collect, “Keep us both outwardly in our bodies and inwardly in our souls, that we may be defended from all adversities which may happen to the body, and from all evil thoughts which may assault and hurt the soul.” One of my dear Carmelite nun friends years ago said to me that there are two ways to change one’s life. The first is to change the outside, change what one does, change one’s environment, change what one eats or drinks or buys – with the understanding that this will change us *inside* – at least eventually.

I think this is the approach behind many of the practices in which we typically engage during Lent. We cut our screen time, give up things we enjoy, maybe do extra acts of kindness – in the hopes that by feeding our better selves, we will end up *being* better.

The second approach is to work at changing my insides – with the belief that this will also change how I act, the choices I make, the things I do or don't do. This is the “change my perspective” approach. If I can see things differently, that change will affect everything else.

In our first reading, we have a wonderful example of this. We're reading from the early part of the Book of Exodus. Joseph and his brothers have died. The Israelites have increased in numbers. The king of Egypt is afraid of “them” taking over – there are so MANY of them - and orders all the male Hebrew babies to be killed. Moses is saved by his mother and is ‘adopted’ by the Pharaoh's daughter. He is raised as an Egyptian. And then one day he sees a fellow Egyptian beating two of the Israelites, and he kills the Egyptian – and then must flee Egypt to avoid being killed himself. He winds up in Midian and meets a woman at the well and helps her water her father's flocks after chasing away some shepherds who were trying to cause her trouble. When this woman goes home, she tells her father, Jethro, about the “Egyptian” who helped her at the well – and the two end up married.

That brings us to today's reading. Moses is taking care of the sheep, when he sees a burning bush.

Then Moses said, “I must turn aside and look at this great sight and see why the bush is not burned up.” When the Lord saw that he had turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush, “Moses, Moses!” And he said, “Here I am.”

Twice the text tells us that Moses “turned aside” – he changed his perspective. And when he did so, God became present to him in the burning bush.

But more change is required of Moses. When God tells Moses that he is sending him to set the Israelites free, he doesn't say, “to set *your people* free.” No, God says, “So come, I will send you to Pharaoh to bring *my people*, the *Israelites*, out of Egypt.” And in Moses' response, we can hear that even he sees the Israelites as “those people.” Moses tries to deflect God's call by saying, “Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring *the Israelites* out of Egypt?”

When I'm going to Indiana to see my family, I don't typically say to people, "I'm going to visit the Stiers." No, I'm going to visit *my family*. – Moses saw the Israelites as other, not family. God calls Moses to *repent* – to change his perspective, so that "those people" become "my people." He calls Moses to reclaim his identity as a member of the people of God...

Changing his perspective – turning aside *just enough* – let Moses see the burning bush, let Moses encounter God – and that changed his life – and ours – forever.

Our perspective – our world view – our way of looking at things – affects everything. We make judgments based on how we think the world operates. And that is the subject of the conversation we walk into in today's Gospel. Some people have just come and told Jesus about horrible things that had happened... people savagely murdered, and their faith mocked...a disaster when a building fell. It could be a scene from the news of today. You know the murmuring that went on. We heard it years ago when, in 2010 – in the face of the earthquake in Haiti – evangelical preacher Pat Robertson said the people of Haiti were being punished for having made a pact with the devil, and hurricane Katrina was a punishment for abortion. The Galileans were not the 'right' kind of Jew, perhaps. That kind of world view puts "us" in the judgment seat, and "them" being judged as godless. But Jesus is very clear here – things happen; *bad* things happen – but they are not a punishment from God. In common language, we would say, "Shit happens!" - And that is most likely the actual word used in the parable Jesus tells about the fig tree: The gardener, who really knows the trees – who is confronting the cost-benefit model the landowner is using to judge the fig tree – says, no – don't cut it down. Let me cover it in – manure – and then if you still want to touch it to cut it down, you go right ahead. God's justice is not ours. It is not about production or fairness. No, God's justice is *mercy*.

Rector Marshall Jolly adds a helpful comment for us here. He says, "Although Jesus insists that the relationship between sin and suffering is not causal—that is, God does not cause us to suffer *because* of our sin, Jesus also reminds us that *sin itself* can cause us to suffer. There is no question that Pilate's murderous deeds—as well as the horrific actions perpetrated by today's tyrants—are sinful. And sin has consequences."

And here I would say that sin is not the little things we do or don't do, so much as the perspective that leads us to do those things in the first place. I've said before that Sin is whatever separates us from God – and whatever separates us from one another. As Paul says, it's because I forget that I am God's temple, that I am the dwelling place of God, that let's me fail to take good care of this body God has entrusted to me. It's because I do not see another as part of *my family, my people* that allows me to exploit others, or to invest in companies that do = because I will get a good return on my investment. It is my *perspective* that separates – and the separation is the sin.

So where does this take us? Where can we go with this? How do we change our perspective? I mentioned earlier two approaches to change – from the inside and the outside. This is not an either/or but a “both/and” time. I can work at changing my perspective, my worldview, by actively seeking experiences that are not in my current circumscribed world. That's the aim behind the Center for Christian Spirituality's Lenten film series – getting to know my neighbor. The films take us into the world of another... giving us the chance to see things differently... and perhaps the chance to see the people in the films not as “them” but as “us.”

We can watch our own language – how often my use of “they” or “those people” can be a clue that I'm committing separation! We were given a marvelous example of the power of such language in the *positive* direction in the response that New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern has made to the self-proclaimed white supremacist's terrorist attack on two mosques in Christchurch. Instead of responding with a rhetoric of violence, she covered herself and stood literally and figuratively with her Muslim sisters and brothers, proclaiming that “If one part of the body suffers, the whole body suffers. We are one.” She is living and preaching, not the sin of separation, but the truth of unity.

We *can* change our perspective, our world view, the way we see things... and that will be something that changes how we live. That will be the real repentance to which we are called.

Amen.

- [Exodus 3:1-15](#) [1 Corinthians 10:1-13](#) [Luke 13:1-9](#) [Psalm 63:1-8](#)