

FACING THE WIND

"I wanted only to try to live in accord with the promptings which came from my true self. Why was that so very difficult?" So wrote the German author Herman Hesse roughly 95 years ago, in the dust and the mud and the ruin of The Great War -- the "war to end all wars" -- and amid the anxiety, fear and economic ruin which precluded the rise of Nazism, the Great Depression, and the second global convulsion. To live and breathe and have our being in accord with some deep and abiding sense of self and of God -- is this not a universal ideal, is that not a deep longing, though one with which so many of us struggle? To identify and claim these things, these sentiments, these emotions, these yearnings that germinate and take root deep within our soul -- is this not the very essence of the spiritual journey itself? Stop, pause, breathe, and pray; reflect, meditate, and ask again -- *"why is that so very difficult?"* Here is an age-old question, but one we must ask in Lent and beyond: What is it that gets in the way? How is it, really and truly, that we are to set our mind and our heart on things divine and above, and not merely on things human? How is that we are to lose the material so as to gain the spiritual? How is it that we are to deny ourselves and take up our cross and follow? How is it, in the words of the Psalmist, that we might *"dwell in the house of the Lord for ever"*? [Psalm 23: 6] Really, *"Why is that so very difficult?"*

I am quite certain, as always, that I have no definitive or foolproof answer to offer. Certainly not in these present and uncharted and anxious hours. Certainly not in our present world and amid our present circumstances. Men and women, seekers and the lost, disciples and drifters, and faith communities both large and small have wrestled with this call, this challenge, this summons, this mystery, for well more than 2000 years. And so, in what I have discerned and prayed to be a truth-filled and life-giving process (at least for me), I answer and approach these vital questions with yet more questions. I hear and I listen to and I digest scripture, and then, at least for now, at least in this season of personal and communal waiting and worry and wonder, I reflect back even while I dream ahead. I sit. I seek quiet. I counsel patience for my self. I urge my soul to settle. I try not merely to 'hear', but to 'listen'. God is here, in all of it.

Between the lines of Holy Scripture, at all times and in all places, we are offered some direction which foretells a right pathway and a heavenly future. Clearly there are many such questions for the seeker to ask, but I offer three to you this morning, three questions which I pose to myself in an effort to chart a way through the wilderness of my own soul, three questions which might, in a gentle manner, minister to us and to our thirsts, just as the angels ministered to

Jesus in his desert wanderings, just as the water came forth from the dry rocks at Massah and Meribah as we heard last week. Three questions which I have asked every person and parish, every year, every Lent, for more than 30 years, on this very same mid-Lent Sunday:

First, what is your passion? What is it, at the most profound level of your being, that you love and cherish and enjoy? What gives you the deepest and most lasting sense of satisfaction? Each of us will answer differently, and no two of us will be drawn by the same desires nor fulfilled by the same purpose. But within that examination the underlying barometer is the measurement of just how often -- or not -- you find, follow, pursue and allow those passions to shape and reveal your true self to others and to the world. Since all that we do is mission in some form, this question need not be viewed only as a "Sunday question" or some catechism test. Quite the opposite. God endowed you and me with gifts, no two alike, and with offerings for the world, no two alike. I am convinced that the passions of your soul, part of that precious and beloved formation by God, are also what make you and me alive in the Spirit and engaged in the world. So where are they now, your passions and your dreams? What has become of them? How do they thrill and animate and sustain and nourish you?

Second, where are you broken? I know, that is becoming a slightly overused word in the religious lexicon -- 'broken'. But I mean this in the most tender and gentle way possible, in the way that Jesus himself approaches such fracture and wounds, in the ways by which you and I might come to know our true selves by actually laying claim to such places and pains within and without. 12 Step programs talk about making a "*searching and fearless moral inventory.*" This is indeed a courageous undertaking, a journey to be commended, but I am actually speaking of something simpler, at least for now, at least in this anxious time. For we cannot be healed unless we know and name where that healing is actually needed in us, and we cannot then heal the world or others unless we ourselves are at least striving for such healing in our own midst. Ecclesiastes reminds us that for everything there is a season, and in due time we shall pass through them all. And so a season of the heart, and a time of calm and some space for Godly examination can lead us to authentically declare and name our own wounds and transgressions, our own stuck places and stiff necks, how we feel hurt and where we have hurt others. This is not an exercise in self-pity, but rather I see this as a spiritual undertaking of great truth and honor -- "*Here I am Lord*", imperfections and all.

Finally, what is your cross? Actually, let me re-word that question in a more radical and, I think, more authentic Christian fashion: for what would you be willing to die? Under what

circumstances, for which person or belief or ideal, in which situation or for which principle would you be prepared to lay down your life? This is really what Jesus is asking us in the Gospels, and it is, perhaps the essential question of discipleship. What is it in your life, in your faith, in your Spirit that you treasure and value so dearly that you would, in fact, deny all else and follow, even unto death? This is what Dietrich Bonhoeffer and others have come to claim as “the cost of discipleship”, the price we gladly pay for the gift of Christ Jesus, the total and utter giving over of ourselves so as to know “costly grace”. As Bonhoeffer wrote shortly before his execution: *“Such grace is costly because it calls us to follow, and it is grace because it calls us to follow Jesus Christ. It is costly because it costs a man his life, and it is grace because it gives a man the only true life.”*¹ What price then would **you** pay? Where? How?

So, three questions, three places, three resting points in our wilderness time of Lent: What is your passion? Where are you broken? For what would you be willing to die? I am sure there are more, others, but in this present age and under the anxious clouds of an exceedingly fragile world, this is my self-examination in March 2020. I don’t expect miraculous answers overnight. But I know that if I do not ask these questions then there shall be no answers of any kind at all, ever.

And thus I pray, for us and for our world: Walk gently. Sow kindness. Seek solace. Find rest. Make amends. Offer forgiveness. Receive forgiveness. Share a hug when the Spirit permits. Be, as Robert Frost once wrote, “a swinger of birches”, if only for a while, to remember what it was like to look at the world in such a new and different way. Love God, but most important, please allow God to love you. And may your Lenten journey continue with hope and with courage and with peace, as we make our fitful and fearless way to the empty tomb.

~ **Amen.**

¹Dietrich Bonhoeffer, The Cost of Discipleship, Collier Books, NY. c1963. p47