

First Sunday in Lent

GENESIS 9:8-17

PSALM 25:1-10

I PETER 3:18-22

MARK 1:9-15

February 18, 2024

Wilderness Rainbows!

What could be more beautiful than a rainbow? Considering all the natural beauty that surrounds us every day here in the Northwoods, gifted with the grandest of vistas so abundant that we almost get to the point that we take it all for granted. Nothing compares to a rainbow, a technicolor display revealing every color in the universe, even surpassing Joseph's infamous coat of many colors! Shout out to the fabulous performances at the Northland Pines High School, many of our tribe assisting in the musical, making sure the show goes on! Nothing seems as beautiful as a rainbow, a fleeting sight to behold as we briefly gaze with awe and wonder at those magnificent symmetrical colors that extend from the clouds to the ground, an arch that never ceases to amaze, delight, and surprise us as the stormy gales of nature begin to abate, ebbing out of sight as their rumbles move into distant horizons. Today we read biblical texts, that when juxtaposed against one another, offer to us a sense of bane and blessing, the comforting peace of God, green pastures beside still waters, pictured against the backdrop of the ominous dangers lurking in the darkest valleys of death, stealthily hiding in any wilderness setting. Yes, these polarities literally span the spectrum of any event, any thought, any experience, all combined to frame our lives as we take each precious breath this wonderful life has to offer, as we live, and move, and have our being. There is no satisfying oasis without desert, no land without an Ark, no balm in Gilead without wilderness, no answers without questions, no Christ without a cross, ironically, perhaps the ultimate symbol of beauty revealing God's love, no life without death, no resurrection without crucifixion, no Easter without Lent. There are no rainbows without storms! Today, as always, we walk a fine line, the balancing act, between all that is good, very good, and all that is evil, destructive, believing as we go, yes, as we begin another forty-day adventure in our hungering and thirsting quest for God. Lent

provides open spaces, offering the freedom, painting with large brush strokes the breadth and depth of belief and faith, our belief and faith, as we navigate our personal and collective search for holiness, hoping and praying to experience at least a modicum of the sacred. Once again, we enter what has to be the most substantive essence of a contemplatively reflective and penitential discipline, foundational, cornerstone stuff, that defines the Lenten season, this holiest season of Lent, allowing and imploring us to recalibrate the equilibriums we need to live our best lives now. There is more here than we could ever digest, sacred images that amount to liturgical overload, climaxed at Holy Week, more than we could ever even begin to unpack in a sermon. And yet, some words have earned their annual repetition, worthy of our refrain as we join in the ancient chorus of the Church in retelling the old, old, story of Jesus and his love, his passion and death, his resurrection, raised to new life. Surely some words are in order because our limited language, our inadequate, sorely lacking vocabulary, is all we have, and yet essential, necessary, for us to begin to even slightly convey the breadth and depth of all the thoughts and emotions that this part of our religious pilgrimage demands, yes, these sacred practices, perhaps the sum, the consummation of all our devotional and spiritual disciplines, force us to confront the darkness before it gives way to the light of dawn. We do so intuitively, knowing full well how unsettling and off-putting and how inviting and welcome is every Lenten image, eliciting every emotion and feeling, every thought, that drives this, our passion as we recall his, passion being the operative word here, buoying our belief, fueling our faith.

The first Sunday in Lent always bids us come and follow, beckoning us to join with Jesus in his wilderness journey as he prepared to come out as a rabbi, launching his career as a profound preacher and prophet, a peasant reformer unlike any before or since, yes, the one who would come to be called the Christ, Messiah, and names once reserved for Caesar, like Son of God. Using a very familiar biblical number, we are told by the Markan writer that Jesus was in the wilderness tempted by Satan for forty days matched by the longest of forty nights. Jesus' sojourn in the wilderness was the Gospel writers' way of connecting Jesus to a wilderness journey of biblical lore, metaphorically recalling, remembering, the once upon a time long ago when Moses led the soon to be chosen children of Israel out of bondage and into their land they claimed as

their own, the Land of Canaan destined to be their settled land, a land of milk and honey they believed was ordained for them, promised to them for only God knows when, the Canaanites, among other indigenous inhabitants, disrespectfully treated as nothing more than mere caretakers. Biblically speaking, the wilderness is frequently a place and time of trial, of agonizing self-doubt and self-discovery, a desert steeling the weary traveler for whatever part of the journey comes next, ironically providing the very spiritual oasis for which our souls long, our hearts desire, our spirits so desperately need. **Yes, Jesus was tempted and tested, tried in every way that any human being could be or would be, especially when contemplating the calling in life to which anyone has ever been called. Jesus' mettle was sharpened, steeled, in every way because this man was fully human, his humanity a historical fact that so often gets forgotten in a story immersed in divine drama, shrouded in the mythology of God-talk, saturated by biblical God-speak. All of us, in our own ways, have been tempted, tested, and tried, and all of us on our good and bad days have passed with flying colors and have failed miserably. It is the lot, the very nature of our DNA as we continue to evolve, the essences of our gifted and challenged humanity, of all our individual and collective journeys, our unique pathways, yes, each and every experience illuminating our human being and doing, always an existential smorgasbord!**

So, speaking of wilderness, using this metaphor as a most positive image, we are about to enter our own version of what might be described in some ways as a wilderness experience, perhaps a facsimile thereof, as we officially and finally begin the Open and Affirming process, festivities kicking off with your volunteer Task Force meeting for the first time tomorrow evening. They begin the arduous and delightful process of determining the process that will guide our process! All prayers are welcome! But while the biblical wilderness experiences of old were often tied to periods of exile, as difficult as those dark times were, despite these experiences even being embraced as some of them seemed to be, we gladly, joyfully, anticipate these days of discernment to come, knowing there will be challenges, some struggles, even the potential for a little healthy conflict. We enter this holy season of discernment during one of the most sacred parts of the Church Year, our hearts and minds devoted to all things penitential, including times of individual solitude, centering spaces offering quiet rest, and gatherings of communal reflective contemplation, contemplative reflection. We begin this

wilderness trek at the most opportune time of year, when our spiritual sensitivity is heightened, our devotional awareness piqued at perhaps peak performance. I always love the serendipity of the liturgical calendar, the Church Year always amazingly and seamlessly capturing whatever path we seem to be traveling, blending a host of biblical and real time metaphors. What better time than Lent than to explore what Open and Affirming might mean for us going forward as the people of God called together as the local missional church, the beloved faith community, known as the First Congregational United Church of Christ? What better time to ponder the hospitable welcome and inclusion of all people, “no matter who they are or where they are on life’s journey?” What better time to consider the possibilities, all the potential, that comes with being proudly, unabashedly and unapologetically, “extravagantly welcoming,” to use a familiar United Church of Christ mantra, to be expansively inclusive, hospitably inviting, vulnerably open. And of course, as we all know, we already are. Open and Affirming simply stamps our denominational ticket, putting us squarely on the UCC map in its website capacity declaring our position, telling the world in crystal clear, no uncertain terms, what this congregation has been claiming and proclaiming for decades. Open and Affirming simply galvanizes our positive position as we seek to practice what we preach and preach what we practice. At the end of it all, we will no doubt be changed, perhaps radically transformed, transfigured to use a rich biblical image from last week, and yet, still the same, nothing changed because we already are, we have already embraced. What we are describing is more of the same, nothing new under the sun and yet, while still the same, surely different, evolved in ways not yet even imagined, perhaps giving birth to a new day dawning. As the Johannine writer of I John assures, “beloved,” as children of God “what we will be has not yet been revealed!”

In the Witness from the Hebrew Bible in Genesis we read the story of the aftermath of the flood, the survivors, having withstood the wind and waves of another forty days and nights, landing on *terra firma*, now coming to terms with the reality of creation, part two, the do over. More than a three-hour tour, with God as its skipper and Noah as first mate, what a boat ride it was, the tossed about Ark creating its own kind of wilderness. Leaving the limitations of literalism behind, the interweaving of the Priestly and Yahwist writers, having borrowed or stolen, indeed plagiarizing, from the Mesopotamian poem called Gilgamesh Epic, paint a

portrait of a God seeking to improve relations with a humanity deemed to have not lived up to the set standards of the Holy, failing to measure up to an unreasonably high bar, perhaps unfairly set way beyond the human pay grade. Reading between the lines of the text, it is as if God was subtly admitting to regrets about these destructively reactive judgments, promising that never again would a flood destroy the earth, a covenant that foreshadows the greatest covenant God would eventually conceive with Moses and the children of Israel at Sinai. And the symbol for this permanent covenant? Well, it was none other than the rainbow, the colorful arch that continues to symbolize the whole of humanity, all people of all stripes, every culture and race, every color and hue, every ability, any orientation, yes, “no matter who they are or where they are on life’s journey!” And if God was not so all knowing and perhaps a bit forgetful, the rainbow would be the reminder in the midst of storms, though not a constant one, to never again perpetrate such evil in the midst of what at creation was called by God not just good, but very good! And this sign was not just a promise to the human creature, but to every creature, an acknowledgment that in the great flood all animal and plant life became collateral damage.

Today, the rainbow, a beautiful symbol of God’s love in its own right, as it always does, provides a rich and colorful metaphor describing all creation including the human parts of it, every aspect of our humanity. The rainbow is all-inclusive, encompassing the whole, the entirety, of humanity, all people everywhere, yes, you and me, as we say in the south, “All ya’ll!” The rainbow is never limited, never confined, to one group or the other! The rainbow symbolizes the best of the created order and the vast intents and purposes that God established and longs to maintain. Yes, the rainbow has sometimes been reduced to an exclusive allegory defining and describing persons of LGBTQQIA+ orientation, limited to this one important and significant community. Of course, as we are all fully aware, this special people group has historically been ostracized, ridiculed, and painfully harmed, even persecuted, terrorized and tortured. Even so, the rainbow is not a proprietary symbol belonging to the LGBTQQIA+ community, but rather, the rainbow covers all, all persons, everyone, including the likes of you and me. If not for the planet below, the rainbow perhaps would form a circle, the circle being an all-inclusive, all encompassing, image, that like the ever-widening arms of a lovingly gracious God enfolds everything and everyone.

My reminder to you, a reminder that you will hear over and over and over again as we engage this Open and Affirming process, is that while one specific, yes, appropriately singled out community sometimes is accentuated to be the well-deserved tail that wags the dog, that what we are seeking, who we are striving to be, makes sure that none are excluded, assuring ourselves and the world around us that all persons are noted, counted, prioritized, valued, never taken for granted, and are an always integral, vital, yes, a necessary part of our fellowship, this relational beloved faith community, this local missional church. Whenever we gather, we come together in the hope and prayer of doing God's bidding on earth as it is in heaven. Our goal is to be explicit in our reach, not making benign assumptions driven by subtle implications. Yes, the rainbow is an enduring biblical symbol, the attacks and criticisms on its spectrum of the purest absolute beauty I find bizarre, strange, yes, disturbing and unbiblical, usually hurled by biblicists who claim to be biblical, who swear they know and love the Bible. We fly our flag proudly, knowing that for which we stand, one church, under God, seeking social justice for everyone, period, say it with me, "No matter who you are or where you are on life's journey!" And that means that no one is ever left out, and that this north star always guides our hands and feet and thankfully invites and includes you and me and welcoming everyone else! May the bow in the clouds always point us in the right direction, reminding us of our ultimate purpose, galvanizing our mission and ministry, as the First Congregational United Church of Christ! Keep on being who you are, yes, who you are being! Keep on doing what you do, exactly what you are doing, yes, with more of the same! It's all good!

In the name of the One who creates, redeems, and sustains, and once sent a rainbow of acceptance, affirmation, and assurance, a symbol that continues to brighten every darkened sky! Amen and amen!