

(Love) Letters for Lent/ LENT 1
February 18th, 2024
1 Peter 13:18-25
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When I was younger, in my more “emo” college years, I would resist the Hallmark holiday. I’d make black iced heart shaped cookies, or hearts with the cross out circle, or even one year, little St. Valentines with their heads cut off. Then I realized I was putting a lot of effort into something I didn’t celebrate.

Valentine’s Day is about love. It’s not a religious holiday. It does have sacred origins. In fact, it began as an act of social justice and protest.

There was a Bishop by the name of Valentine. Emperor Claudius made a law forbidding persons to get married. He needed soldiers to fight his battles. He didn’t want them to marry and stay home. Valentine married couples secretly. He was put in prison. He sent letters of hope and encouragement to his friends outside. They were the first “*valentines*”. The Bishop died on February 14. “Valentine's Day” reminds us of his courage and love for others.

Valentine’s Day comes each year with an opportunity to celebrate and witness to the power love has to change and shape lives. It’s an opportunity to reach out in ways that show we care. Love was Jesus’ strategy for transforming the world. This year it came with an extra reminder. Of love—and death. Mortality. From ashes you shall return. This is a season I “celebrate?” Recognize.

We begin our Lenten series—“Love Letters for Lent”. I call it this, because instead of focusing on the readings from the Gospel, I wanted to push my own scriptural study a little. Today is the first Sunday in Lent. Lent is a time to remember and re-discover who and whose we are and what that means for how we live. It’s also a time to reclaim and renew our relationship with God, others and the world.

Our text is Mark’s account of Jesus’ temptation in the wilderness; the traditional reading for this first Sunday. Matthew, Mark and Luke all record the story. Mark has the shortest and sparsest. Matthew has eleven verses. Luke has thirteen. They’re both full narratives describing in detail three temptations: turning stones into bread, jumping off the temple tower and inheriting all the kingdoms and power of this world. Mark has no descriptions, no dialogue with the devil, no challenges and no Scriptural quotations. Mark simply says,

“And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him”.

Our second text this morning is from First Peter. The authorship of this letter is uncertain. Some say the apostle Peter wrote it. Others say it was an early church leader using his name. It’s written to a community of Christians—a pretty mixed bag-- in Asia Minor who are facing persecution. They’re suffering and some are being killed. It’s hard to endure and to stay faithful. The author writes to encourage and assure them.

He reminds them of their baptism. He uses the analogy of Noah. God chose Noah. Noah obeyed God. God saved Noah from the flood. They too will be saved by God’s act in Jesus Christ. They’re to trust the grace God has given them in Christ and in their baptism. They’re to live faithfully. No matter what happens they’ll be all right.

God waited patiently in the days of Noah during the building of the ark, in which a few, that is, eight persons, were saved through water. And baptism, which this prefigured, now saves you—

We remember Noah in our baptismal service also. It’s part of that prayer known as *“The Thanksgiving Over the Water”*.

In the days of Noah you saved those on the ark through water. After the flood you set in the clouds a rainbow.

The early Christian who decorated the catacombs also claimed Noah’s story. One of their favorite symbols was Noah in the ark; looking more like a small box than the boat we think of. But the message was the same. In the face of death, in that place of death, those Christians chose Noah as a symbol of hope. God would deliver them. No matter what evil, danger, trouble or suffering they faced, God would bring them through it.

That’s Peter’s word also. *Don’t be afraid. Remember your baptism. No matter what may happen, no matter how “deep” the waters are or how high they rise, you won’t be drowned. Storms may come into your lives or into the life of the world; floods (literally and figuratively) may arise and threaten to drown you. Take courage. Be confident. God is with you. Like Noah and his family you will be delivered.*

And there is another truth in there too.

It may be a good thing that the RCL appoints 1 Peter 3:18-22 as this Sunday's Epistolary Lesson. Otherwise, preachers might succumb to the temptation to skip over it without ever addressing this passage that's both so theologically rich and, in some places, deeply mysterious.

Lent is the season during which God's dearly beloved people try to let the Spirit prepare our hearts to both remember Jesus' deep suffering and celebrate how God afterward raised him to life. In fact, verse 18's "Christ was put to death in the body but made alive by the Spirit" offers a wonderful summary of just what Christians plan to celebrate and remember during Lent.

Jesus graciously did all of this for us. For the sake of what verse 18a calls "the unrighteous" [adikon]. Here is the gospel's great news that's the context of its grim news. Jesus didn't suffer [epathen] and die for the dikaios ("righteous") folks of the world. He died for the adikon, the "unrighteous."*

A man in the Midwest had a wonderful plan to get the girl we was interested in. Instead of a traditional proposal, he wrote and sent a beautifully written love letter to her each day for a year. After 365 letters describing how perfect they would be together, it worked. She married the mailman.

One Pastor suggested that the Bible is God's love letter to us. I firmly believe that God keeps trying new ways to reach God's people. Peter says—all the people, righteous, unrighteous and more. In some ways, we too, "marry the mailman." God loved us so much God became one of us. And that one taught and healed and blessed—and when they still "didn't get" it, tried one more, final idea. "I will show them how much I love them—even if it means dying on a cross."

One day, a teacher asked her students to list the names of the other students in the room on two sheets of paper, leaving a space between each name.

Then she told them to think of the nicest thing they could say about each of their classmates and write it down. It took the remainder of the class period to finish their assignment, and as the students left the room, each one handed in the papers.

That Saturday, the teacher wrote down the name of each student on a separate sheet of paper, and listed what everyone else had said about that individual.

On Monday she gave each student his or her list.

Before long, the entire class was smiling. "Really?" she heard whispered. "I never knew that I meant anything to anyone!" and, "I didn't know others liked me so much," were most of the comments.

No one ever mentioned those papers in class again. The teacher never found out if they discussed them after class or with their parents, but it didn't matter. The exercise had accomplished its purpose. The students were happy with themselves and one another. That group of students moved on.

Several years later, one of the students was killed in Vietnam and his teacher attended the funeral of that special student. She had never seen a serviceman in a military coffin before. He looked so handsome, so mature. The church was packed with his friends. One by one those who loved him took a last walk by the coffin. The teacher was the last one to bless the coffin.

As she stood there, one of the soldiers who acted as pallbearer came up to her. "Were you Mark's math teacher?" he asked. She nodded: "Yes." Then he said: "Mark talked about you a lot."

After the funeral, most of Mark's former classmates went together to a luncheon. Mark's mother and father were also there, wanting to speak with his teacher.

"We want to show you something," his father said, taking a wallet out of his pocket. "They found this on Mark when he was killed. We thought you might recognize it."

Opening the billfold, he carefully removed two worn pieces of notebook paper that had obviously been taped, folded and refolded many times. The teacher knew without looking that the papers were the ones on which she had listed all the good things each of Mark's classmates had said about him.

"Thank you so much for doing that," Mark's mother said. "As you can see, Mark treasured it."

All of Mark's former classmates started to gather around. Charlie smiled rather sheepishly and said, "I still have my list. It's in the top drawer of my desk at home." Chuck's wife said, "Chuck asked me to put his in our wedding album." "I have mine too," Marilyn said. "It's in my diary"

Then Vicki, another classmate, reached into her pocketbook, took out her wallet and showed her worn and frazzled list to the group. "I carry this with me at all times," Vicki said. Without batting an eyelash, she continued, "I think we all saved our lists."

Tears rolled down the eyes of the humble teacher.

So this week—look at letters of encouragement. Words of hope for another. What might your words mean to someone else? Perhaps you can reach out to an old friend by text or email? Perhaps you can tell someone you love them—especially if you “think they already know.”