

**Remembering**  
**A sermon by Rev. Joe Hoffman**  
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*First Congregational United Church of Christ, Asheville, NC*

Lent is a time for reflection and remembering. We remember who we are. We remember old stories of faith. We remember what we have learned about ourselves and about life. We remember whom it is we follow and seek to live like. And we remember who we are trying to become.

The gospel stories of Lent lead us eventually to Jerusalem, the center of political and religious power in the days of Jesus, and to the cross where Jesus personal commitment to love at all cost was attempted to be crushed for all time. We read these stories from our Post Easter perspective, knowing the larger outcome of the Jesus story. But we wonder for ourselves if our lives will have an Easter outcome. If our communities can learn from the story.

We start Lent each year with our Ash Wednesday service. We remember on this day that we are dust, and to dust we shall some day return. Brenda reminded us in her Ash Wednesday sermon a few years ago that we are not super man or super woman, but we are dirt man or woman. We come from the dirt. We have to know who we are. And who we are not. And this past Wednesday, Brenda again reminded us that this is a time to remember that we are dust – that it is dependence day. We remember that God breathed life into our lungs and set us on this journey.

The first Sunday in Lent begins each year with the telling of the temptation of Jesus. The spirit of God leads Jesus into the wilderness where he lingers for 40 days and is tempted by the Evil One. Matthew and Luke give us extended accounts of the temptations, but Mark is a writer of few words. We are left to our own imaginations to know what Jesus experienced and how he responded.

Whatever it is that took place, I think we learn that Jesus was very human – that he was tempted by many of the same temptations you and I have in our lives. Not temptations of how much tv we should watch, or how many sweets to eat, but temptations of what is of value in our lives.

One of those temptations for Jesus might have been the temptation to get even with those who do you harm. If someone hurts you – then how can we hurt them back. Or maybe it is when someone does your wrong, how can we make it right – make it better. To start over. To take away the pain.

I don't know about you, but I have done some things that, in looking back, I found myself saying: My God, what have I done! Maybe you have felt this way too. Maybe you are aware of a time when your actions or words added to the deterioration or destruction of a situation instead of helping to turn it toward a new possibility.

Our other story today is from Genesis – a very early faith story. The main character in this story is tempted to act in a very violent way, and in fact does so. Afterwards this one looks at the destruction and does not say My God, what have I done – but Myself, what have I done. The character is God. God has destroyed all flesh on the earth with the exception of 8 human beings and one pair of each variety of animal on earth. God was so angry, put out, disgusted with the people of earth that God gave up on creation and wiped out all that God had made – except for this remnant of flesh that floated about the flood in an ark.

Maybe it was the first time God realized how powerful God could be. Maybe God realized how violent power could be. And God says – what have I done? And then, God learns from what God has done. I don't know about you, but I like the image of a God who learns and changes. The ancient people who told this story must have believed that God can change too.

No more would God act with violence and destroy. No matter what the presence of evil might do on earth, God would not wipe it out. And the possibility of evil existed still in the 8 humans who remained. Whatever they did, however they chose to treat one another and the earth, God promised never again to destroy creation. Human beings would eventually have the power to destroy the earth with bombs and pollution and such violence. But God would neither destroy nor take over in order to save the world.

God had realized that destroying the earth and the people of earth would not bring about the world God imagined. It would take the commitment of humanity to bring it forth. God had given us the gift in the act of creation, and now God would trust that we would stumble along and work at it and eventually find our way. God would empower us, would work with us, but God would not come and wipe out evil and wrongdoing.

As a symbol of this covenant – and covenant that required nothing at all from humanity and everything from God – God placed the rainbow in the sky so that God would remember. God took a symbol of war and violence – the bow that was meant to shoot arrows – and God aimed it away from earth. God transformed the weapon into a symbol of peace and promise. It reminded God of God's promise. And it reminds us, people made in the image of God, that we too are called to turn our weapons of destruction into symbols of peace and justice. God made this covenant with all flesh – not just with Israel. It was for all people and all animals. A universal covenant of peace.

The flood event changes God. There will be no more arks, no more escapes. From that point on we are all in this life together. We are all aliens, sojourners, and stewards for the season we exist on this earth. We are not alone. God is with us, but nevertheless, it is for us to stay the course and work things out – not to wait for God to come and fix it for us. God meets us in the midst of life, but God will not come and magically change it for the better.

Lee Griffith has written a book entitled *The War on Terrorism and the Terror of God*. In this book, he calls us beyond the terror, and offers some human examples as illustration. He mentions in particular Leo Tolstoy, Dorothy Day, and Desmond Tutu.

Leo Tolstoy was born into nobility, joined the army, and realized considerable success as a novelist. It was because of his status in life and his immense success that he experienced a crisis that caused him to think more on God, community, and nonviolence. One of the turning points for Tolstoy came in December of 1881. He spent the day in Moscow, in a poor section of the city, giving out money and helping people who lived on the streets. Then he returned home for a 5 course meal that he hosted for some of his wealthy friends and acquaintances. In the middle of that meal, the contrasts of his day caught up with him. He arose from the table and said to his wife Sofya, "One cannot live so. It is impossible!" And from that time on, he tried to live his life differently, dispossessing himself of his considerable wealth, freeing his serfs, working in the fields, responding to the needs of the poor, and renouncing terror in all forms.

For Tolstoy, God is love, and love is the source of all life. Each person is an image, a particle of that love. And Tolstoy saw God not as the Unmoved Mover but as the Love who is the Force of Life. (pp. 252-255)

Dorothy Day was involved in the Catholic Worker movement, originated by a French man of peasant background named Peter Maurin. Maurin's philosophy was that the future will be different only if we begin living differently in the present, and that requires not an institutional solution but a personal commitment. Be what you want the other person to be. Don't criticize what is not being done, but find the work that you can do – and do it. Dorothy Day took this philosophy, and instead of working with issues, tried to focus her life living out the Gospel – which had so much to say about loving your enemy, feeding the hungry, showing love for God by loving the least among us and calling them sister and brother.

For Dorothy Day, what was required was daily acts of resistance, beginning first with the resistance to all forms of terror, and to the lack of love inside us. She called us not to win out over our enemies, but to win them over to ways of love. And to love the person we loved the least as if that person were God. (pp 258-263)

And finally, Desmond Tutu. We know him as one who stood in the face of apartheid in South Africa and called for a new way. But his goal was not just the end of apartheid, it was the living into of God's beloved community by all people. He stood before the guns of white security forces to defend the lives of black protestors. But he also stood in front of angry mobs of blacks to defend the lives of outnumbered white policemen who were in danger of being murdered. Tutu said there had to be consistency between means and ends. If the goal is to end terror, then the means to get there cannot be by terror.

Tutu helped lead the Truth and reconciliation Commission in South Africa after the system of apartheid was dismantled. Some of his country wanted proceedings that would be conducted in secret and that guaranteed blanket amnesty. Others wanted a process

more like the Nuremberg trials where officials would face criminal trials and punishment. But Tutu knew the anguish experienced in South Africa could not be healed by a simple forgetting or even simple hangings. So instead, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission would offer amnesty to all former officials and operatives of the apartheid government and to all former opponents of the government who had been guilty of atrocities if they appeared before the commission and publicly acknowledged what they had done.

The effort was to help the perpetrator become human again – not just evil – but human, in order that all the people could get their humanity back again. (pp. 263-268)

These stories show us how we can find a way in the midst of terror and great destruction to find our lives – to live our faith – to find our peace. This is what God learned after the flood. This is what Jesus learned in his days of temptation. This is the gift that you and I can receive by earnestly living the gospel life.

Maybe we would do well to have a symbol close at hand to help us remember who we are. A rainbow by the front door. A saying on the wall in the kitchen. And maybe we need to engage in daily acts of resistance as did Dorothy Day. Something that helps us remember. We do not ever want to forget.

The work in this season of Lent is remembering who we are. Remembering who we follow. Remembering who we seek to become. And then being and doing as best we can what we remember.

So may it be. Amen.