

St James United Church



Message for February 18, 2024 First Sunday in Lent

“It's All About Relationships” - Preached by Rev. James Ravenscroft

Genesis 9:8-17; Mark 1:9-15; “The Water We Seek” by Jalal al-Din Muhammad Rumi

Relationships. It's what today's readings are about. It's what Lent is about too because it's what God's Reign is about, relationships extending in widening circles to embrace loved ones, friends, acquaintances, strangers, enemies, other creatures, the earth, this time given as an opportunity to reflect on our tendency to stand apart from each other and instead to align our lives with God's Reign where hostility to others is transformed into hospitality instead.

To live into God's Reign we need start with our relationship with God, echoed in our gospel as we're brought back to a story we associate with the Sundays after Epiphany more than Lent, when Jesus is baptized and he experiences God's claim on him as beloved. I like how Lent begins here this year, grounding the season as both a time of preparation for those seeking baptism and an invitation for those who have been baptized to reflect on its significance.

It's why we hear another water story when after the flood God covenants with Noah, his family and all of life. It uses imagery from Genesis as God brings forth the world from water and as part of that creation makes all of the plants and animals and forms humans in God's image and likeness. Our most fundamental relationship is with God, both our source and goal. On Ash Wednesday as people receive a cross of ash they're often told “Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return.” As much as it's a reminder of our mortality, the finite nature of life, it refers to the second creation story, to the dust from which God makes us. It is from God that we come into being and it is to God that we'll return.

Union with God is our core identity, something we share with Jesus, and yet we often lose sight of this in our lives, seeking that relationship in many places other than where God is. Augustine famously spoke to this in his *Confessions*: “Late have I loved you, beauty ancient and new...And see, you were within, and I was outside and sought you there. In my unlovely state I plunged into the lovely things that you made.” Rumi hints at this, that we dream we're seeking water when it is right beside us. Lent is an opportunity to pause and nurture this most important of all relationships. The traditions associated with this time are rooted in that. Many people fast or give something up. It isn't about punishing yourself; rather it orients you back to God every time you feel a pang of hunger, want some chocolate, or itch to play a video game.

But as we recall in the great commandment, we not only love God with all that we are but love our neighbours as ourselves. And so, as we're redirected back to God, we're also redirected back to our neighbours. The tradition of fasting is tied to giving alms, the money saved when we fast, don't eat chocolate, don't use electricity to play a game, to be used for others. Which is why Jesus realized that his connection to God as God's beloved child was not enough. He went into the wilderness to wrestle with what this meant and then returned to Galilee where he called others to turn to God, but not on their own but in community as he called his disciples.

It's about relationships, but they need to be life-giving, which is also thematically why he was in the wilderness, his time there echoing yet another water story, that of the Israelites escaping enslavement by crossing through the sea, then spending forty years in the wilderness. There they learned a new way of being with each other, not the domination model they learned in Egypt but a cooperative model as they shared, only used what they needed, worked together to solve issues before appealing to those above them. It was a struggle to put into practice, as we will discover in later Sundays, but they were testing a different way of relating to each other. Jesus likewise was being tested. Like any of us, he would be tempted to revert to the ways of power, to doubt that fundamental relationship of God's love and in that doubt use relationships to get ahead. But Jesus came to preach God's Reign where mutually life-giving relationships are key. Joan Chittister points to how this is Lent's point. She writes: "Lent is to open ourselves to life. When we 'rend our hearts' we break them open to things we are refusing...to consider. We have refused for years, perhaps, to even think about renewing old commitments that we've allowed to go to dust - spending time with the children, visiting our parents...We've closed our minds...to the thought of reconciling with old friends whom we have hurt. We've refused to put the effort into reviving old spiritual practices... Lent is the time to let life in again."

And this refers to all of life. Again, we look to Jesus in the wilderness. He is there with the wild animals. There is again a creation connection. Jesus is presented as a new Adam, communing with the animals. In Genesis 2 God brings them to Adam to see if they can be helpmates. And while none would be what the human needed, the wisdom in the text is they had potential to be, not resources but companions, creatures given a name, each having an identity. The Noah story points to this too, God's covenant made with all creatures, not just Noah and his family. That all of life is connected in God in multiple relationships is something else to ponder in this reflective season. I'll use the example of fasting in this context. As we consider more what we eat, we take stock of our relationship to food, how it is produced, the impact on our world.

It's all about relationships, this season a chance to take stock of how we are with God, one another, creatures with whom we share the earth. We are enmeshed in a world that is more hostile than hospitable, that uses relationships rather than nurtures them. Thankfully we have six weeks to ponder, seek renewal, ask forgiveness if need be. Let us enter this holy time of fasting, prayer, study, almsgiving, nurturing relationships with each other and God. Amen.