

Continuing to Learn

United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT

February 26, 2023 – 1st Sunday in Lent

Text: 2 Timothy 3:14-17

Welcome to the first Sunday of Lent! This season in the life of the church is one of the better known ones of the liturgical calendar since even those outside of the church are somewhat familiar with it. Ashes on foreheads mark its first day for all to see. Grocery stores and restaurants increase their Friday fish offerings since the connection to meatless Fridays still rings true for many. Even the idea of giving up something for Lent has some appeal for those outside the church, although I suspect most folks see it as a second chance at the New Years Resolution to lose weight that's already gone by the wayside. When Lent appears on our calendars it is also a reminder that spring is at last on the way, despite that our first snowfall happened just yesterday and it wasn't that much!

So, what is Lent anyway? How did it get started? The biblical roots of Lent go back to Jesus going into the desert for 40 days and nights immediately after his baptism where he was supposedly tempted by the Evil One, Satan, the devil – however you want to describe the evil forces which tormented Jesus at this time. Thus, it's easy to see that the 40 days of Lent correspond to Jesus' 40 days in the wilderness, less Sundays of course. Sundays don't count as part of Lent – did you know that? It's because every Sunday of the year is considered a "little Easter." The 40 days of Lent also correspond to the 40 years the Israelites wandered in the desert after leaving Egypt before God finally led them to the promised land. They were condemned to wander for those 40 years because as soon as they escaped Pharoah's army who were swept away in the Red Sea, they started complaining about anything and everything. The last straw

was when they built the Golden Calf while Moses was up on Mount Sinai receiving the Ten Commandments from God. This story reminds us that there are limits even to God's patience!

As I was doing some reading on the origins of Lent, I came across a rather curious statement on Wikipedia which states "Lent is a period of grief which ends with the great celebration of joy on Easter."¹ I found this description of Lent quite surprising because I have never thought of Lent as a prolonged period of grief. It is certainly a somber period, a timeframe for pausing to reflect deeply and sincerely on who we are as opposed to who God intends us to be. But a time of grief? I suppose for the most devout among us regret over our sinful nature could stretch into grief but, honestly, I do not see this as a universal experience among Christians observing Lent. A challenging time, perhaps, especially if one takes on a Lenten discipline like giving up a favorite food or surrendering time to focus on some sort of spiritual discipline like reading or journaling. Grief we observe on Good Friday during Holy Week and if we have allowed ourselves to become fully invested in our journey through Lent, our grief on that day is deep and real.

This does raise the question, though, of how we make our individual journeys through Lent. There are plenty of options for doing that certainly. I developed a Lenten Devotional Calendar if you're looking for some ideas. At its most basic one's journey through these 40 days should allow for a little extra time spent with God as we make our way through the somberness of Lent to the raucous celebrations of Palm Sunday as Holy Week begins. Then we come to the last night Jesus spends with his disciples on Maundy Thursday. This in turn leads us to the unbearable grief of Good Friday, the cold emptiness of Holy Saturday and the unbridled joy of the Resurrection on Easter morning. Lent is indeed a journey, one which can be deeply meaningful if we put in just a little effort to the process.

¹ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lent>

One of the key elements of Lent from its very beginning – some trace its origins back to the Council of Nicea in 325 CE although there are a few references to something similar to Lent as early as the first century CE. From its start, one of the main elements of Lenten observance by the faithful was participation in education and study of the Scriptures along with church doctrine and dogma. In my particular Presbyterian upbringing, Lent was the time of study designated for those wanting to join the church. Exploring the key role study and reflection plays in Lent is why I chose this particular text from Paul's second letter to Timothy for this morning. It's all about the importance of education, of learning the basic tenets of faith and what it means to love and follow Jesus. Paul makes the interesting point here that part of our learning process in the faith is who we are learning about our faith from. In Timothy's case, Paul makes it clear in the first part of this second letter that Paul knows Timothy learned his faith from his mother and grandmother. This matters, Paul says, because their teaching of Timothy is evidence of their love for him. The fact that he took to heart what they taught him is evidence that Timothy respected them and that this faith had more meaning for him because it was gifted to him by the two people who meant the most to him in the world.

Now am I saying that if you didn't learn about faith as a child from someone you loved and trusted that is somehow a problem? No, of course not! So many folks come from homes without any faith whatsoever yet they still find themselves hungering for something more in life, without really knowing what that could be. They come to this church or another one and something just clicks – maybe because of the pastor or may because of the people in the church or the music ministry of the church or even the missions work of the church. Ultimately, I believe whatever draws you into the church – family, friends, seeking answers or even rejecting old ways of living – it's the Spirit that underlies it all. This is why taking some additional time to study and learn during Lent can be so valuable. It is a time to reflect on what we know and what we don't know about the faith we profess. This is true for those of us who have devoted ourselves to the church

all our lives and for those just now deciding there are questions they want to explore. Lent is such a time to study and reflect, to ask questions and wonder about possibilities as well as problems. Lent is a time when we can dare to come before God exactly as we are and listen for what God might be trying to say to us. Lent is a time to admit that there are limits to our knowledge even as we dare to believe that God has no such limits.

The most important reason for taking the time and making some effort at study during Lent is summed up in the last verse of the text from Timothy we read this morning. Paul is reminding Timothy of the value of studying Scripture when he writes, “All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work.” Two key concepts in this run-on sentence! First, Paul is very wisely reminding Timothy – and all of us – that scripture is *inspired* by God. *Inspired*, not dictated as claimed by biblical fundamentalists. It’s also important to remember that at the time this letter was written, roughly 65CE, the canon of Scripture as we know it now did not yet exist. The Christian Gospels were just starting to be written down and there were way more than the four which made it into our bibles. The letters which make up the Epistles and the Writings weren’t even compiled yet. So, what scriptures was Paul referring to here? Had to be what we know as the Old Testament. But even then, the canon of the Hebrew Scriptures was still in flux. The Pentateuch, the Psalms, Isaiah and the rest of the prophets and wisdom writings, they were still in a refinement process themselves – some already relegated to the large clay jars buried in the desert which would some day be unearthed and named the Nag Hammadi and Dead Sea Scrolls.

What are we to make of this then? If Paul says scripture is inspired by God by what exactly those scriptures were he was referring to is unknown, how do we know what we should be studying? That’s a question which reveals the genius of the Bible. Paul’s words, just like the words of the Gospel writers, the writers of the Torah, the Psalms, the Prophets – all of them – constitute the Scriptures as a living

entity, changing and evolving with each generation which encounters them. How can that be, you wonder. It's because every time we encounter the text, we are experiencing the intersection of three worlds – the world of the writer of the words; the world the writer was attempting to address in those words; and the world in which we live and experience our faith each day. This constant interaction between the world of the text, our world and the world of the writer infuses the text with rich life and ever evolving meanings and interpretations. For example, when we read the story of Jesus healing the crippled man, or the child plagued by demons, we can envision those medical problems as we would understand them today. The child probably had epilepsy. The man might have had a badly broken leg which didn't heal correctly. What we don't think, as the writer did or as the people at the time did, was that these health problems were caused by evil spirits. That's because our world experience tells us these health issues were medical and not spiritual in nature. It was not these people's fault they were ill. In their own time, these ills would have been considered signs of God's disfavor.

Interestingly, and importantly, the intersection of these three worlds of the text – the writer, the scene or thoughts being written into, and our world experience – do not change the miracle of healing by Jesus. Were Jesus' healings of the crippled man and the child who threw himself into the fire really miraculous? I honestly don't know, but it certainly seems that it was. In any case, it doesn't matter to me because I trust that Jesus was able to change something in the situation that caused healing. And I personally have a whole new appreciation for healing after my recent dental surgery adventures. When the endodontist completed the root canal I had needed for weeks, the healing I felt in that moment was absolutely miraculous to me. And trust me when I tell you I was thanking Jesus all the way home!

So, Scripture is worthy of our study because it is inspired by God as is our reading of it. But didn't I say there were two things I wanted us to think about more deeply in today's text? Yes, I did and the

second one is the final clause: “so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work.”

Proficient in the scriptures in order to be equipped for every good work. Proficient here does not mean that you can quote chapter verse appropriate to every situation you might find yourself in. At least not to my thinking. Rather, proficient means you know how to read the bible, trusting that it is inspired by God and trusting that you are inspired in how you read it. In other words, you feel comfortable picking up the bible and reading it yourself. Just reading it. Not searching for any specific answers, although you might find some. Not expecting any particular insights or epiphanies, although that sometimes happens. No, to me, proficient means you have a bible you can access and that you are not afraid to read it. You trust that you can pick it up and see what it says for yourself. You know that if you have questions, you have folks you can come to with those questions – like me.

The best part of this whole text though is those last few words – equipped for every good work. This is why the scriptures matter in a nutshell. Studying scripture on your own or here on Sunday mornings is part of you being equipped for the good works God is counting on you, on each of us, to do. Being inspired by that scripture study to learn more about things outside of the scriptures – like last Sunday’s consideration of the crisis of homelessness – is also part of being equipped for every good work. Being comfortable enough with the scriptures to know when someone is twisting them in a way that is hurtful to someone else – and not letting that harmful interpretation stand – that too is being equipped for the good work of countering misinformation. And let’s face it, when it comes to misinformation, there is way too much of it out there about what the Bible does and doesn’t say about a whole lot of things. Dear ones, when the Bible is being weaponized to harm people, which is happening way too much these days, you have to know enough about the Bible to recognize when this is the case. You have to know when to speak up against prejudice and bias of all kinds, especially when our sacred scriptures are used as the rationale for perpetuating such hurtful ideologies as

racism, sexism, ableism, and homophobic and transphobic actions. You have to know that parts of the New Testament, especially the Gospel of John, are intentionally anti-Semitic and yet there is still much of value in the other parts of those writings. How do we negotiate that rocky, murky terrain? This is where knowing how to read the bible and how its three worlds interact to create our understanding is so incredibly valuable. This approach to biblical reading indeed opens up the entire experience which becomes more empowering and energizing as we do it.

And so, dear ones, as our Lenten journey together begins today, I invite you to dare to include a discipline of continuing to learn as part of your Lenten practice this year. Take a devotional guide and see which of the suggestions you find intriguing and follow them! Join me and others in our JESUS AND JOHN WAYNE discussion group on Christian Nationalism. Come to worship and bring some paper to write down your questions each week. Read the newspaper to stay current on the issues affecting our town and the world we will be passing on to our children and grandchildren. If you would be interested in committing to a bible study, let me know that too. I would love to lead one for us, but when I have tried in the past, the interest has just not been there. I am still here, still willing ... if you are.

Dear ones, I know I am asking a lot of you as so many of us feel like we are struggling with information overload as it is. Know that I am not asking you to take on more so much as I am asking you to engage more with what you need to know as a follower of Jesus in order to make a difference, however small it might be, in the world God has gifted to us. I am asking you to open your hearts and minds to the inspiration that comes from God when we are more alert to God's movement in our lives. Knowledge is a terrible and wonderful thing which is why it is so very important. And never forget that there is always, always, always someone out there wanting to tell you what the bible says about this, that or the other hot button issue of the time. There will always be someone who wants to tell you the "right" way to read the Bible so you are "correct" in knowing what this or that or the other things means. Let's face it – that's something you should be

able to do for yourself. But can you? Will you? Those questions, dear ones, you need to answer for yourself. I'm here if you need me.
Amen.