

**The Rev. Dr. Hilary B. Smith**

**Holy Comforter**

**Richmond, VA**

**February 22, 2015; the 1st Sunday in Lent**

**Readings:** Genesis 9:8-17; Psalm 25:1-9; 1 Peter 3:18-22; Mark 1:9-15.

## **Reimagining Lent**

Not growing up in the Church, there was a lot about Christianity and Christian traditions that I did not know as I lived into the faith as a young adult.

My first year in the Church and going to church, I remember someone asked me, "Is your birthday always in Lent?"

I replied, "I have no idea...this is my first Lent."

It turns out, sometimes it is and sometimes it isn't; February 21st, this year it was in Lent, yesterday in fact.

The implication in the question was....having a birthday in Lent would not be one's first choice.

Not growing up as a Christian, or any other religion, and becoming a Christian in my early twenties, meant that I did not have too many preconceived ideas about Church and faith.

Except all the negative things I had heard from Christians that had kept me away.

Like the guy with the life-size cross who would show up on the University of Richmond campus was I was a student, and yell at us, saying we were sinners, and that women shouldn't be in college, that we were all going to hell...and his wife had a button that said, "I am my husband's servant."

Remember that guy?

Some of you on college campuses around here in the 1980s and 90s might remember him.

There are thousands of people who live within miles of our church who

know only that about Christianity...that guy... and associate that...condemnation, judgment, threat, anger... with church. They would be very surprised to know who we are and what we believe. This is one of the most important reasons to know what we believe about issues of sin and forgiveness...for ourselves and for those with whom we feel moved to share our perspective.

One of the things that I realized as a new Christian, was that I knew a lot about sin, although no one I knew called it that...that sounded so medieval to me...but I did not know much about forgiveness. I knew a lot about the wilderness, but not much about the new life promised to us by God...through our relationship with God. I knew a lot about the “heaven-and-hell” framework, from that guy with the big cross on campus, but nothing about how a church like this understands sin, forgiveness, the God of our salvation.

As I asked on Ash Wednesday, in reference to this theme I’ve been addressing, if the “heaven-and-hell” framework as a defining way of understanding the Christian faith is not helpful, and not Biblical, how can we understand Lent, a season which has a focus on repentance, outside of that framework, while still taking seriously the reality of sin in our lives and in the world?

Just to review, the “heaven-and-hell” framework is a way of understanding the Christian faith that primarily focuses on sin and our need for forgiveness so that one goes to heaven and not to hell. But even in Lent, this is not a framework that we want to imploy. Yes, we want to be real about sin and our need for forgiveness, and repentance, but we do not want to visualize God as an angry father who is just waiting to punish us and might even reject us entirely if we don’t do this confession/repentance thing right.

We don't want to visualize God like that or represent God as being like that...but for those who grew up and/or have lived with the heaven-and-hell framework, it may take some effort and some time to really let that go.

The Bible can help us.

Our reading from Genesis is a great help.

One of the most important things to do to leave the heaven-and-hell framework behind, is to focus on God and what God has done and can do, rather than focusing on us...as if we could save ourselves.

The story of the Flood, Noah, the Ark, the Rainbow, is the story of God choosing humanity, choosing us even though we are not perfect. In the story, God makes a covenant with all humanity, that no matter what happens, God will never again flood the earth:

“God said to Noah and to his sons with him, ‘As for me, I am establishing my covenant with you and your descendants after you, and with every living creature that is with you...’

‘When the bow is in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that is on the earth’.”

God does this not because the remaining humans have changed after the flood...but because God has decided to work with the people and the earth, given what is.

The rainbow is put in the clouds not to remind the people, but to remind God of the covenant God has made.

There is great hope in this story.

God will never give up on us, even though God knows we will never be perfect.

The healthy way, the mature Christian way to deal with sin in our lives and

the world, is to always start with God...that God desires that we live...that we live freed from the burden of our sins and freed from the oppression many suffer from sin on a macro scale.

Marcus Borg does a great job of enlarging our understanding of sin and what keeps us from being free in his book, *Speaking Christian*.

Borg writes, "For some people---indeed the majority of people who have ever lived---the issue is not so much that they sinned, but that they were sinned against.

They are victims of sin as well as sinners.

Victims of sin need not forgiveness..., but liberation, reconnection, healing, wholeness, and a world of justice and peace."<sup>1</sup>

The "heaven-and-hell" framework is just too simplistic...of only we could fix everything by confessing our sins and being forgiven.

The situation in which we find ourselves is more complex than that, and the Bible affirms such an understanding.

As Borg, states: "Sin matters. But when it and the need for forgiveness become the dominant issue in our life with God, it reduces and impoverishes the wisdom and the passion of the Bible and the Christian tradition."<sup>2</sup>

Borg urges us to consider additional images for what ails us, "...that we are Pharaoh's slaves in Egypt and need liberation, that we are exiled in Babylon and need a path to return home, that we are blind and need to see again, that we are sick and wounded and need healing and wholeness.

And yes, that we are sinners who need forgiveness."<sup>3</sup>

Borg suggest that we use these images in worship and preaching, as we are today.

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<sup>1</sup> Borg, Marcus J. *Speaking Christian: Why Christian Words Have Lost Their Meaning and Power---And How They Can Be Restored*. HarperCollins EPub., 2011, p. 150 of 238.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 152.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 151.

If only our confessing our sins and being forgiven could fix all the world's problems or even our problems.

But we cannot save ourselves...and so we focus on God, and who God wants to be for us...and who God is for us.

We meet Jesus in the wilderness, and we learn from him, from his story. The account that we have in Mark of Jesus being tempted in the wilderness is quite brief.

This year we do not hear about turning stones into bread and that sort of thing.

What do we learn from this account?

After being affirmed by God at his baptism, after knowing God's love, knowing of the relationship that is the foundation of his life...then the Spirit, drives him into the wilderness...and he was tempted by the darkness, but the angels (in this account) were with him the whole time.

And after this wilderness time, Jesus begins his ministry in earnest, proclaiming that all should repent, reassess, turn around, and live into the reality of God's reign that they are seeing in him and through him, his words, his actions.

Lent can be a wilderness time for us in a good way.

Like Jesus, we can enter this time knowing that God loves us...that God will never turn away from us or give up on us.

We may wish to make more space in our lives for God during Lent.

That is where the whole "giving up something for Lent" comes from.

We don't give up something to suffer but to make more space...where we may be tempted because we are giving up something that filled space...can we invite God into that space?

And for some talking on a spiritual practice makes space for God, rather than giving something up.

I believe that God wants us to do that which will help us deepen our relationship with God, become more aware of the

relationship God already has with each of us...with you.  
Perhaps a way to deepen our relationship with God, become more aware  
of the depth of it, would be to do something that helps us be  
more connected with others and/or the earth.

I am delighted that our Rain Garden is being installed during Lent.  
What could be more perfect?

We are making space for a visible tribute to God...making space for a  
project that helps us to be more connected to the earth as a church,  
and thereby know of our relationship with to God in a new way,

We will be preparing soil and planting so that God can give the growth and  
nurture the earth with the rainwater that will go directly into the earth  
rather than becoming runoff that mixes with chemicals, which  
damages our waterways.

We will be dedicating/blessing the Rain Garden on March 22nd.

The Rain Garden has inspired some of my prayer and reflection.

I leave you with the image/metaphor that I shared on Ash Wednesday of  
God being the gardener who, with our consent and participation,  
uses Lent as a time to prepare the soil of our hearts and plants  
a seed or seeds.

These are seeds of grace, of healing, of nurture that God wants each of us  
to have.

During Lent these seeds can germinate, so that when Easter arrives we  
are really seeing some growth.

What would the seed God gives you look like?

You may wish to imagine or even draw the soil and seed or seeds.

This could also be a prayer image, almost like a *mantra* in visual  
form---feel God's love for you as you hold this image of a seed in  
your mind.

May Lent be a season of making space, for you, for God to nurture the soil  
and plant the seeds...a time of knowing that God is about new life in you.  
Amen.