

“WE ARE BOUND TOGETHER”

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4th Sunday in Lent

Text: Joshua 1:1-9; 2 Corinthians 5:16-21

We have embarked on a “journey of the heart,” walking these Lenten days toward resurrection. Embracing transformation, new possibilities, and a new life is what our journey is all about. Little did we know just a few weeks ago how hard this wilderness really would be. We set out on a “journey of the heart” on our way back to God. This wilderness has led us through the valley of the shadow of death, through the deep canyons, over rocky, mountainous terrain. Little did we know just a few weeks ago that we would find ourselves in the middle of a pandemic. Quarantined with various businesses shut down. Hoping for the best, but bracing for the worst. Many have shared about their fears related to our current state of affairs. Friends, I want to share with you that we were not given a spirit of fear. Somewhere around 365 times, the Bible tells us to not be afraid—do not fear. God’s got this.

Even though our Lenten journey took a hard turn, we still have work to do before we arrive in the garden with an empty tomb. At this point, it’s hard to even think about Easter, but its there--on the very distant horizon. And when we catch even a small glimpse of it, we find ourselves wanting to run ahead and get there quickly. But if we listen to the Apostle Paul, we are reminded that we still need to walk slowly and with great care. While we are all in and still, this is a great opportunity to be still, to do the work of the wilderness. Before we can get to the new creation of Easter, we have some repair work to do within our own hearts and in our world. So far on our journey, we have travelled through fruitful fields, barren wilderness, countless stars, promises of God both large and small, and tables where all are fed. Like threads that sew together a patchwork quilt, this week we begin binding together our journey with repentance, reconciliation, and repair.

While you are in and quarantined to some degree, I want to invite you to read the Book of Joshua in the Bible. It is an amazing adventure story. God repeatedly urges Joshua and the people to “be strong and courageous” (1:6) as they face the enemies who had made their ancestors cower. There were high points, such as the fall of Jericho in Joshua 6, which is commemorated in children’s songs still today. But there were also low points, such as their initial defeat at Ai in Joshua 7, where thirty-six warriors lost their lives as a result of one man’s disobedience. When pain and suffering come into our lives, we are often faced with

challenging battles. How we respond to these hardships will impact those we love and the generations to come. The book of Joshua provides a beautiful picture of God's goodness, kindness, and mercy toward his children who stand strong in the face of their enemies. There seem to be 3 strong themes in this book I want you to pick up on. First, real courage comes from God. Second, trust God's presence and third, our inheritance is for sure. Read this story. Study this story. This is our story.

There is a particular concept that our Jewish brothers and sisters use to describe how they are called to respond to a world that feels like it's coming apart at the seams. It is a process that calls all humanity into action. *Tikkun Olam*, in the simplest of terms, means "to repair the world." When the fabric of society is torn, *Tikkun Olam* not only calls each of us to participate in mending what is broken, but to make it better than it was before it was damaged. And when it comes to the art of repairing the world, there are no shortcuts, no easy answers. It is the difficult and time-consuming work of repairing by way of reconciliation and restoration.

To repair systems and structures, we usually need to break them down to basic levels, see where the problem is, address the root causes of failure, and then begin rebuilding. It is not hard to look around this world, our own communities, perhaps even our own families, and see a thousand different fissures, or fractures—cracks where God's harmonious creation has somehow gone awry. *Tikkun Olam* is not about grand gestures, but rather small acts of kindness, small steps made in faith, small displays of love and solidarity. Each daily action that embodies lovingkindness does not necessarily make an immediate, large impact. But as we keep loving and walking in grace, our collective actions, all together, can add up. They can begin to make a new world—a whole new creation!—if we only have eyes to see it.

Paul urged the gathered community in Corinth to expand their vision, to see that "everything has become new" (2 Corinthians 5:17). This kind of seeing moves beyond what our eyes can plainly see. Humanity has always tended to focus on what is broken, what is limiting, what is imperfect—both in ourselves and in the world. What if, on our way to building a new and better world, all the limits we put on people and things were suddenly dismantled? What if we started to see the world through the eyes of Christ, whose eyes saw human difference as an opportunity to expand the reign of God on earth? What if we saw this pandemic as an opportunity to help bring God's kingdom on earth?

Jesus saw through all barriers and boundaries, broke them to the point where even Death lost all its finality. Jesus saw through all brokenness and hopelessness, poured himself out to the point where love conquered all. What if part of our Lenten discipline involved learning to see with grace-healed eyes? What if we learned how to see with a newer, broader vision so that the widening of our vision led to a widening of our hearts? What if we focused on the threads of creation that bind us together and through the work of reconciliation began to stitch the threads of a new creation—threads that would bind us closer to one another and to God?

Our reading from Paul recalls a prophecy from Isaiah about the world made new: *“Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old. I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert”* (Isaiah 43:18-19). Paul continues this ancient theme, telling us the new creation is always and everywhere in our midst. It is always being created. And it is created by us through Christ. We are God’s vision. We are the ones that are resurrected with Christ. We are the ones who, while walking the wilderness way, have found Living Water in the desert. It is no longer enough to simply see and perceive that a new world is possible. Because we are to be the agents of reconciliation who keep working to bring God’s vision into reality. Paul proclaims, *“So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation.”* Anyone? Anyone! Are you in Christ? Then you are a new creation.

The Lenten wilderness is a place where it becomes necessary to shed some of our old ways. During this time, we need to let go of sin and selfishness, greed and self-centeredness to make room for this whole new, resurrected life into which we are called to live. Paul asks his community—and us—to *“be reconciled,” “trusting the ministry of reconciliation to us.”* Reconciliation will involve letting go of our old ways of seeing. How can our Lenten journey help us to see beyond the obstacles and stumbling blocks, the places where the fabric of humanity seems too threadbare and torn? And how can we begin to open the eyes of our hearts, to dream of a world fully reconciled and renewed, resurrected and restored?

Many of us don’t want a new vision, a new way of living and being. We were content to stay as we were—in our own grave-clothes. We don’t like change. Change is hard. But the good news is Christ keeps calling, beckoning, pulling at us, and drawing us together so that all Creation might be reconciled to God.

As we are being reconciled to God and as we are becoming God’s new creation, I am reminded of Romans 8:28, which says this, *“And we know that God causes everything to work together for the good of those who love God and are called according to his purpose for them.”* This says to me in this time that God can bring incredible good out of something so hard. Do not lose hope. Some of you may have already lost your job. Do not lose hope. For some of you, your income has been cut in half or more. Do not lose hope. Some of you are worried about your health and the health of your loved ones who are vulnerable to this infectious disease. Do not lose hope. Some of you have children at home who don’t understand what is happening and you are at a loss for words. Do not lose hope. Some of you are at your wits end being quarantined with loved ones. Do not lose hope.

God’s got this. I don’t know how. I don’t know when. I don’t know what our future will even look like. But I know that Romans 8 tells us that nothing in all of creation will ever separate us from God’s great love. Absolutely nothing!

One of the FaceBook posts I read was a letter from a school superintendent that basically said we will never know if we have overreacted and maybe we have during this time of pandemic and quarantine—we will never know. But we will know if we have underreacted. Friends, I would much rather overreact and know that we all are safe, then to blow this off and then be overwhelmed with funerals.

This is our time to shine, my friends! We have this golden opportunity to be still and know God within ourselves. We have this opportunity to open ourselves up to be repaired and healed by the master Physician. I have found myself very aware that I had let petty stuff inch its way into my life and begin to control my thoughts, my time and my priorities. This is a great time to hit the “reset” button. We now have an incredible opportunity to be a part of something new—a new creation. Not just in your life, but in our world.

Joshua 1:9 says this:

Be strong and courageous!

Do NOT be afraid! Do NOT be discouraged!

God is with you wherever you go!

Friends, this is the verse I have claimed over Olivia since before she was born. It is the verse I prayed over her in the NICU and through every surgery. It is the verse she has memorized. We say it every night. Teach your kids this verse. You claim this verse. For such a time as this, we need to be bold as Christ followers.

During this time, love on each other. We are a part of God’s new creation--call those who sit around you in church. We are a part of God’s new creation--call or send mail to our homebound and nursing home friends. We are a part of God’s new creation--offer to pick up groceries for someone who is high risk. We are a part of God’s new creation--love on the people you used to think were unlovable. We are a part of God’s new creation--reach out beyond your comfort zone to help someone else.

The world will never glimpse God’s vision unless we share it, unless we make a concerted effort to say with our hearts and our lives: this is where the world has been torn apart...this is where love is calling us to go...this is what love is calling us to bind and to build. Let us heal the hurt with the ties that bind it back together in Christ. Let us point to the places where water flows in the deserts of life. Let us work to live into the fullness of God’s good creation. Let us see beauty while creating harmony, justice, and reconciliation—one small act at a time.

Amen