

## Lent 1C 2022

Romans 10:8b-13

Luke 4:1-13

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About this time two years ago, the world began its descent into the pandemic. Many of us began sheltering at home. Physical distancing, masks, and the avoidance of large indoor public gatherings, like church worship services although necessary, further isolated an already divided nation even further. We had entered the wilderness, divided, isolated, many of us alone.

This time two years ago, the church was in the middle of Lent. It feels like that Lent has taken on the true biblical meaning of 40 days, which is old testament short hand for “a really long time.” This perpetual Lent, 40-days stretching into two years is a long time to be in the wilderness. Even though there have been momentary reprieves along the way, and signs that the end of this wilderness time was almost here, getting to the promised land has continued to evade us. We keep thinking there will be a decisive end, a sudden crossing of the Jordan from wilderness to that post-pandemic land flowing maskless and COVID free.

But, no sudden and definitive end has been declared. Looking back to the Israelites and their 40 years in the wilderness, scholars debate whether or not the Israelites crossed into the promised land *en masse* or whether they slowly resettled there over time.

Our experience thus far seems to suggest our perpetual 40-day Lent, our Pandemic wilderness time will not come to a decisive end, rather we slowly, over a prolonged time, have been emerging from the wilderness. Maybe the Lent which began two years ago, this collective 40-day-stretching-into-two-year-wilderness time will finally end by Easter this year.

But, to play that metaphor out a little further, at whatever point we do emerge from the wilderness, we **will be** in a new land, just not yet the promised land.

I imagine **as** the Israelites crossed the Jordan into their promised land,

it was for them a new land, just not **an** instantaneously realized promised land. They still had lessons to learn and work to do.

So do we.

And, like the Israelites before us who upon settling in the promised land took “some of the first of all the fruit of the ground, which [they had harvested] from the land that the Lord...God” gave them, and offered it back to God we also need to make an offering of sorts. But, don't worry, I'm not suggesting an offering of money, that's too easy for many of us. No, as we come out of this pandemic wilderness time into this still to be realized promised land, I'm suggesting something much harder, I'm suggesting we offer....grace, and in particular the grace of forgiveness; forgiveness for ourselves, our family and friends, and for our neighbors.

We need to forgive ourselves and one another for the ways in which the pandemic has brought out our lesser angels. We need to forgive the missteps and mistakes, and the imperfect ways in which we have handled this pandemic wilderness time.

God knows none of us were equipped to face the challenges, temptations and vagaries of the pandemic wilderness. Everyone, including the church, has scrambled to pick up the skills needed in this perpetual Lent.

But, in spite of all that has gone wrong, we as a nation, as the church, as families, as individuals, YOU, your family, your neighbors, your congregation, we have handled the pandemic to the best of our abilities, however mistake prone and imperfect.

Yes, in this time of post-pandemic recovery, this not-yet-realized-promised-land, we need to share the grace of forgiveness with ourselves and one another.

Because whether in the wilderness or not, whether in the promised land yet or not, the life of faith is not about reliance on self, or possessing all skills, or having our act together.

The life of faith is about God's grace unbounded and the grace of forgiveness as the way through and beyond the reality of our imperfection, brokenness and death to new life and new possibilities.

Jonathan Rundman is a singer, songwriter and candidate for ordained ministry in our ELCA. In his song, "Forgiveness Waltz" Rundman sings:

it's so easy to drown in the numbers and judgements and earnings  
keeping score, keeping track, keeping time as the hours keep turning  
but you can turn a new way it's a new day

it's like a dance, it's like a wheel, less like math, less like a deal.  
More like a desert becoming a field we can start over we know forgiveness <sup>1</sup>

The grace of forgiveness is not a deal we make with God or God makes with us. Deals are negotiated. Deals have contracts. Deals can be broken.

But, God's grace is not a transaction. It is not a *quid pro quo*. God's grace is pure gift. God's grace is a non-negotiable. God's grace is a promise we can depend upon. And, God's grace is unbounded.

As Fr. Robert Capon writes, grace is "*God's free gift already given, without condition, to everybody.*"<sup>2</sup>

Which is why we have such a hard time trusting in God's grace. *There must be some catch, something we must do. Where's the deal we must negotiate?*

In today's gospel, it seems like the devil, the Father of Lies, is attempting to lure Jesus into making a deal. This is most clearly seen in the second of the three temptations when the devil "showed [Jesus] in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. And the devil said to him, "*To you I will give their glory and all this authority; for it has been given over to me, and I give it to anyone I please.* (On the surface, it sounds like grace, except no, because the devil concludes with) *If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours.*" "

<sup>1</sup> *Forgiveness Waltz*, Sound Theology © Jonathan Rundman, October 31, 2000

<sup>2</sup> *The Mystery of Christ-- and why We Don't Get it*, Robert Farrar Capon, Wm. B. Eerdmans-Lightning Source (October 19, 1993).

And with that, Jesus could see the devil's temptation for what it was, a transactional, conditional deal.

But no, grace is like a dance; it's like a wheel less like math, less like a deal.

In our second reading for today, St. Paul appears to make grace into a deal by using the devil's own negotiating "if, then" formula, writing *"If you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and [if you] believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, (then) you will be saved."*

Many a christian has interpreted Paul in just that way.

But, look again. Paul makes this "if you confess with your lips and believe in your heart" statement **only after** he declares "The word is [already] near you, on your lips and in your heart".

God's forgiving grace always comes first. Faith is something that happens to us because of that grace, not something we conjure up on our own. It is God who sweeps into our wilderness lives, catching us off guard, and announces, just plain declares to us good news.

No deals to negotiate. No contracts to sign. No perfection to achieve.

God's grace is *God's free gift already given, without condition, to everybody."*

WE are, everyone, forgiven and thus freed to offer the grace of forgiveness to ourselves and one another, freed to hold ourselves and each other lightly and with grace.

Freed to follow Christ through and out of the wilderness

This is the answer to our division and isolation, God's forgiving and freeing grace for everybody. **Shared with** everybody.

Because it's less like math, less like a deal, more like a wilderness becoming the promised land we can start over we know forgiveness.