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Confronting Comfort of the Way Home

I've struggled with what God is laying on my heart this week. I've struggled because I want to offer hope and joy, yet we are in this season of Lent, in which we are called to witness to our mortality and our waywardness as Christians, with a keen sense of repentance and reform of life. Ash Wednesday sets the tone: "Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return." It's heavy, like humid air, laden with a thickness that soaks us to the bone, it hangs about us unseen, but with each breath it sinks deeper. We won't be here forever, so it puts an emphasis on what we can do in the here and now.

So what of it? Don't we risk forming too much of an emphasis on what's immediately in front of us if we lose sight of the eternal? What can we do to maximize the time we have with dipping into a sort of presentism, without focusing entirely on the now, at the expense of the future. We don't want to be like Peter, in last week's gospel, trying to remain on the mountain top, to make a dwelling of a wonderful but fleeting moment, a place that God only asks us to pass through on our way home. So how do we find home?

As Brenda said last week, our home is in God, and God abides in us. In some ways, that may make it even harder for us to find home. Think about it, how often do we like to bury things within ourselves, the things we don't want to deal with, there are so many things we want to hide. We often bury our grief in order to appear happy, or bury our anger or fear to appear placid and calm, for example. How easily can we also bury the place where God resides in us, and how much harm can that cause? Burying feelings or thoughts is often unhealthy, how much more harm is it to bury the whisper of the Holy Spirit? How does it hurt us to not listen to the voice that calls us home?

The journey of Lent has a shape to it, I think, almost like a Mobius strip, a geometric object which appears as a figure eight, but only has one continuous surface, wrapping around and around without a terminus edge. That's what I imagine the shape of repentance looks like, an endless journey in which we must continually walk, in order to prevent ourselves from burying the voice of God within us. I'll remind you that the Greek word for repentance, *μετάνοια*, means to "transform." How do we transform the things we bury into the redeeming power of God's presence in us? That's the way we'll keep a candle lit in the dark, the way we'll keep a seed prepared to bud and grow, the way we'll keep our ears open to a voice crying in the wilderness.

And that's where we find Jesus in the gospel for today, spending a great deal of time in the wilderness discerning his call after being washed by baptism and repentance in the Jordan River. This change of life drove Jesus to the quiet and rugged spaces, and he's walking that same journey of repentance in order to better hear the call of the Creator on his life. Jesus, the divine incarnate, is listening for the whisper of the Holy Spirit on the wind. If it took Jesus forty days to figure out his calling among us, then it gives us a lot of reason to be patient with ourselves. It also shows, intentionally and rigorously, that we have to engage in our own discernment.

Lent is a season of repentance, and thus it is also a time of discernment. You see, if we are to repent and to be transformed, we have to make intentional choices to listen for God. We all hear God differently, and maybe some of us will never hear a clear voice, but we may feel a tug on our heart when we really, really try to listen for God. It puts the emphasis on setting aside time to be present to the divine and ourselves. Again, it took Jesus himself forty days, and almost none of us can set aside a block of time like that. That in turn leads us to practices of prayer so that we can focus on our inner life, a space where God may be in us.

I've been reflecting a lot on my own path of discernment in my prayers lately, and how it is that I'm so fortunate to be here in the role that I am. When I've had time to stop and think about it, I've realized how much I have to be grateful for. Yet there's also a buried truth: that much of my good fortune resides with my privileges which are attached to the fact that I am a white, straight, man. And buried a little deeper than that fact is the knowledge of the truth: that much of those privileges are built on systemic racism and colonial genocide. Now, I didn't choose these buried truths, but they are nonetheless part of my life. I don't participate in them by choice, but I nonetheless benefit from them. My ancestors were white settlers in what is now Northern Illinois, and I grew up never having to worry about the color of my skin. In an America where fortune is supposed to be based on how hard we work, I have always had the difficulty level set on easy.

I have the good fortune of being here with you due in large part to the work and the effort I put into my life, and I wouldn't change any of that. But what I don't want to lose sight of is that I was aided the entire way by a system that is deferential to my skin and my gender. The privileges I have aren't bad in and of themselves, but the context which surrounds them makes me keenly aware of the things I need to repent for this Lent as a Christian leader and a pastor. The voice I've been hearing from God is one that says that coming home is a difficult journey. There are hard truths that must be confronted along the way. I must use my privilege to benefit others, just as I would hope others would do for me, and have. How that calls me to transform my life, and how I must reform my actions, is to acknowledge when I've fallen short of upholding others in love and truth. I've messed up by letting the comfort of my privilege dictate what I say to whom in order to keep myself comfortable.

In the summer of 2013 I was making my move across America, I was picking up from Northern New Jersey and heading for the Bay Area. Life was golden, I had my car packed with the possessions I felt I needed for seminary, money for gas, and the open road before me. While passing through Iowa, I found out my car had only one working headlight, and stopped at a dealership in Des Moines to get a new one installed. I remember sitting and waiting in the lobby when an older looking gentleman wandered in and sat down. He looked like some sort of farmer, a profession my dad initially grew up in before becoming a carpenter in his own right. I don't remember how we started talking, but we were jovial.

When he finally pried out of me where I was headed, and found out I was going to school to become a minister, he started asking me questions about what I thought about gay marriage. He had some thoughts about the subject that we differed significantly on, but we kept it quite civil. But at some point, I don't remember how we got to this, but he used a racial slur for black people that is unacceptable. Instead of speaking the truth in love, that this kind of language is

unacceptable, I allowed the comfort of my privilege to let him go on. He didn't say the word again, but the moment for me to use my privilege to confront his choice of words had passed. I didn't stand up to a corporate sin of America in that moment, and I didn't live into the call of God to speak out against systemic injustice. I had failed.

But my failure didn't stop in Des Moines. A few days and many miles later down the road I was passing through Utah, and I stopped at a rest stop about an hour west of Salt Lake City. I remember being dazzled by the rugged terrain, reddish monoliths of rock everywhere. I stopped to take it in for a while. A gentleman pulled up next to me and went to use the facilities. When he returned, we struck up a conversation. He had a pair of binoculars, and he was looking at military blimps off in the distance. As we kept chatting we somehow ended up talking about then President Barrack Obama. The gentleman said the same racial slur. It was hateful, but again, because I didn't want to be uncomfortable, I said nothing. I left soon thereafter. Despite my quick exit, the moment had convicted me in my lack of prophetic witness, all because I just didn't want to cause my own discomfort.

Jesus was tempted in the desert, as we read. He was tempted to use his divine power for his own benefit. But Jesus instead, focused on the word of God as revealed to him in the Scriptures, which clearly point away from the enrichment of the self at the cost of others, and call for paths of peace and righteousness. The devil tempted Jesus with greed for power, but each time Jesus saw through the devil's ploy, keeping himself on the straight and narrow in order to hear God's call to something far different from temporal power. Jesus could have used his own privilege as comfort, but he chose God's voice over the greed and lust of this world. I failed by allowing my privilege to dictate my willingness to speak truth to power. I failed to confront a demon of our society. But the good news is that it's not the end of the story.

I tried to bury that truth. But God has this power you may have heard about in church before: the power of resurrection. God can take the things we want to be dead and bring them back into the world as miracles, and signs of the reign of Christ to come. God convicted me of the truth of my own inaction, and has now turned that into a call to profess the love of God for all people, especially the marginalized and those we want to bury societally, the poor, the sick, the migrant, and to call out our corporate sin and ignorance of the hatred harbored by the powerful. God has caused me to view my privileges not as shame, but as the opportunity to use it for the love of all my neighbors.

And that's where I'll end today, as another broken human before you, struggling to walk the path of repentance in the light of the love of God this Lent. I offer this to you not as a source of shame, but of hope and renewal. May we all listen for the voice calling us home this Lent, and no matter how hard that path can be, I know we're blessed in choosing to walk it at all. May this Lenten journey move us closer to home.

Amen.