The Rev. James Richardson  
First Sunday of Lent  
March 10, 2019

I want to tell you a story. It’s not meant as a funny anecdote but as a modern parable. I heard this many years ago:

Once there was a man, and he was walking down a street. Through no fault of his own, he fell into a hole, and he could not get out. The hole was deep and dark, and he waited and waited, stuck in the hole.

Eventually, the man looked up and saw a priest: “Pastor, pastor, please, help me get out of the hole!”

But the priest said, “sorry, I have a pastoral emergency at the hospital.”

The priest wrote something on a piece of paper: “Here’s a prayer you can pray to get out of the hole.”

The priest goes on his way, and the man is still stuck in the hole. After awhile, the man looked up again and saw a police officer.

“Officer, officer, help me get out the hole!”

The officer said, “sorry, I am on my way to an emergency,” and he wrote something on a piece of paper and threw it in the hole “Call 911, they’ll get you out of the hole.

But the man in the hole had no cell phone and he was even more discouraged.

Then he looked up and saw a friend standing at the top of the hole. “Friend, friend, help me get out of the hole!”

The friend looked down and thought for a moment. And then the friend jumped into the hole.

The man in the hole was stunned. “Great, now we’re both stuck in the hole.”

“Yes,” his friend replied, “but I’ve been in this hole before and I know the way out.”

+++ 

Today is the first Sunday of Lent, the season when Jesus jumps in the hole with us and begins to show us, once again, the way out.

Last Sunday, we were on the Holy mountaintop with Jesus, standing with Moses and Elijah shimmering in the clouds in the spectacular moment known as the “Transfiguration.”
Today, we leave the mountaintop, and walk down into the shadowy, earthy valley of Lent.

This valley can be uncertain, scary, not easy to navigate. But even here, we will find the Holy. Valleys have rich soil. This is a season for nurturing the fertile soil within us.

Consider this Lent to be a time of spiritual richness, a time of discovering anew that which makes us whole, healthy and fulfilled.

Lent is an intensely personal time – a time to ask ourselves what separates us from God. What gets in our way?

The classic definition of sin is to turn away from God through our behavior and attitudes. What is it we do that disconnects us from God?

Ask yourself: What leaves you empty; what leaves you devoid of feeling God’s presence within you and around you?

The word “repent” in its classical definition means simply to “turn around” and see God new, face-to-face.

Lent is a time to “turn around” – repent – and reconnect with God – and by so doing, reconnect with each other.

How? We can begin by intentionally setting aside time each day to pray.

Find a way of prayer that works for you. We have many people here, lay and clergy, who can lend share with you their own prayer practices. Find what works for you.

Take time this Lent to see the holy within you and around you – not just in the thunderclaps, but in the stillness of the night, or in a child’s laughter, or in the smile of friend, or in a meal shared with good friends.

If you need to slow down a little in your busy life, slow down.

If we do a little personal work, we can catch the promise that is ours before we ask: God adores each of us for who we are now and who we are in the act of becoming.

It is traditional to “give up” something for Lent. The traditional reason we “give up” something is to make us more aware of the living God within us.

Sometimes in Lent we give up something trivial like chocolate or potato chips to sharpen our awareness of God.

But let me suggest give up something significant that will change your life, and maybe even change the world.

Maybe you need to give up an attitude or a grievance that eats at you, or an unhealthy habit or addiction.

Lent is not just about our inner life, it is also about our outer life in the world. What can we give up that would make our world a healthier place?
Many churches of several denominations this Lent are promoting the idea of giving up disposable plastics for Lent – things like plastic baggies, water bottles, throw-away plastic food containers and shopping bags.

Much of this plastic ends up in the world’s oceans and is harming vast eco-systems upon which all life on this earth depends.

Let’s join this practice and give up disposable plastic. It’s simply good stewardship.

Closer to home, what do we need to give up to mend our community? What holes are we in as a community? Are there attitudes or practices we need to change? Let’s take a hard, honest look.

Our city – this city I love dearly – is in turmoil over an unarmed young man killed by police a year ago on a night when everything went terribly wrong.

Emotions are running high. Opinions are sharply divided in our community and in this Cathedral congregation.

How can we walk with courage through this valley with those who are in turmoil, or those with whom we may disagree?

How do we become the agents of hope and healing that Jesus would have us be?

We can start by listening – truly listening, and being careful to not dismiss lightly the perspectives and stories that are painful for some in our community to tell – and for some in our community to hear.

This is hard work.

There is a way out of this valley, and Jesus shows us the path. This is, in fact, the path of our discipleship.

This Lent, dear friends, let’s be open to ways – even small ways – to bring healing and hope to ourselves, to the people we love, and to this community and world where we live.

Lent is a fertile valley, and Jesus is with us at each step. And may every blessing light your path in this fertile valley of Lent. Amen.

1 West Wing, second season, 2000, episode #32 “Noel.”
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZQJ6yqQRAQs