



“Our Bond with God”
Scripture – Luke 4:1-13
Sermon preached by Gregory Knox Jones
Sunday, March 10, 2019

This may sound really simple-minded, but I’m going to say it anyway. *It takes time to think.* I know, not very profound. Everyone knows that it takes time to think; however, it runs counter to the pace of our lives, doesn’t it?

When we want to know the weather, we whip out our smart phones, hit the weather app, and in less than five seconds, we know the current temperature, what is predicted hour by hour for the next 24, and the forecasts for each of the next seven days.

If you are looking for a piece of information – say, the distance from Jerusalem to Nazareth or the scores of yesterday’s basketball games or the current price of Apple stock, or the lyrics of a song – you can Google it and have your answer in less than a minute. We can shop for someone’s birthday gift from our kitchen table while we are still in our pajamas and have it delivered to them in two to three days. Unless, of course, the birthday is tomorrow. Then, we simply pay extra to have it placed on their doorstep the next day.

We have become so accustomed to instant gratification that we can become frustrated with things that take time – like growing tomatoes or losing 10 pounds or learning to play a musical instrument. We want to pop it in the microwave and have it ready in 60 seconds. We want to download a song and listen to it *now*. However, there are some things that thwart our desire for instant gratification.

Now, I am not moaning to go back to the good old days. I appreciate accessing information quickly, rather than driving to a library and scouring the bookshelves. Those of you under 25 may have no idea what I’m talking about! Neither do I wish to re-type a whole page because I want to move a single sentence to another paragraph. No one loves “cut and paste” more than I do. My point is to simply remind us that not everything can happen swiftly. And just because some things require a greater investment of time, that should not persuade us to shelve them.

Today’s reading from the Gospel of Luke is the familiar story of Jesus being tempted by the devil. It takes place prior to Jesus launching his ministry. You remember that Jesus approached John the Baptist at the Jordan River asking to be baptized. Immediately after his baptism, Jesus walked up into the hills of the wilderness where he would spend time in solitude for 40 days in order to think. He seized this opportunity to reflect on his relationship with God and how his grace-filled bond would guide his upcoming ministry.

His experience serves as a model for us. Here, at the beginning of Lent, we are to commit ourselves for the next few weeks to reflecting on *our* relationship with God. Each of us will be tempted to ignore it. Each of us will be tempted to carry on business as usual. But, I pray that we may muster the willpower not to capitulate.

Anyone who has been married for more than a decade knows that roping your souls together takes time. After six months of marriage you may imagine that your bond has true depth, but until you have weathered stark disagreements and heartaches, until your emotional connection has been sorely tested, you do not really know how fragile or deep-rooted your bond is.

So too, our relationship with God is built over time. In fact, it is built over our lifetime – as we dance through our celebrations and trudge through our dark valleys. The 40 days of Lent are not the only time we reflect on our relationship with God, but Lent is intended to slow us down for a focused and concentrated period. Some years during Lent our spirit will be light and free, other years our spirit will be assaulted by trials and demands. The various seasons of our lives shape and change our tie with God. I suspect most of us can recall times when our connection with God was vibrant and compelling and other times when it was anemic.

A colleague told about a man who had a major impact on his life—his grandfather. His grandfather was “a good, decent, and reliable man. He was a child of the Great Depression who served courageously in World War II. After returning from the war, he met a feisty young woman who became his wife of more than 60 years. They had three daughters.”

“He was a determined worker who became a successful business owner at a young age. He had everything he wanted and lived the kind of life people worked hard to build. Life was good.”

“Then one day, as his oldest daughter, just a teenager, was riding in a car with friends, the driver lost control. The car flipped and all four passengers were thrown out of the vehicle. Three of them walked away from the accident, but not his daughter, Nancy. She was rushed to the hospital where she lay in critical condition for a few days before he and his wife made the impossible decision to end life-support. The life they had built changed forever.”

“He became quieter and worked harder. Decades later, his grandson asked him what it was like to lose his child in such a tragic way. He was quiet for a few minutes and then talked about the years following Nancy’s death. He said that losing her made him question everything. He had always been a church-going man, but when he lost Nancy, he did not want to return to church. He said he realized that his faith was not very deep. It was little more than obligation. He said he had been going to church and being kind and good and charitable only because he was supposed to be, not because of any deep faith. He spent years questioning God and being angry with God for taking his child.”

“Then one day, something changed inside him. He realized that his anger and hurt were all because he thought that if he lived a good life and worked hard, then he deserved good things in return. It finally struck him that he had been cutting a deal with God, rather than forging a relationship with God. He faced a stark choice: either he could let anger dictate his life or he could deepen his bond with God.”¹

Our relationship with God is much like our union with another person. There are times when our connection is dynamic and beautiful. We are in harmony with the other and life is fulfilling and hopeful. There may also be times when that same bond becomes rocky and frustrating, and communication cools.

It helps to remember that every relationship is ongoing. Our bond with God, just like our tie to others, can become stale, but it is never finally complete. Relationships are always in the process of becoming something else – like a river that is always moving and swirling and changing.

Our relationship with God can be challenging and demanding, and sometimes that strain can make our bond tenuous. But, when the ties that bind us are precarious, we dare not slam the door and call the whole thing off. Instead, we must ratchet up our determination to hang in there until better days return.

Our relationship with God ought to be like a pilgrimage of discovery where our ties grow deeper over time. The more we worship, the more we ingest the teachings of Christ, and the more we live a life with love at our core, the deeper we are drawn into the sphere of God.

What can you do – what WILL you do during these weeks of Lent to advance your relationship with God? Will you attend worship every week and not simply *read* the prayers and *sing* the hymns, but let them sink into your bones? Will you cut out a few minutes of your day to read a daily devotional or a poem or a prayer that will prompt you to ponder your connection with God?

In the same way that we would not want a surgeon who rushed through medical school too quickly², we do not need to floor it so that we reach Easter as soon as possible. Lent is a gift of precious time to listen intently, to think deeply and to gaze with the eyes of our soul at the opportunities that will emerge beckoning us to draw closer to God.

As Jesus pursued the intertwining of his spirit with the Divine Spirit, may we begin to braid together the intuitions and prayers that will tether us to the Holy One.

NOTES

1. Christopher Girata, "The Good Choice," February 14, 2016.
2. Christopher Edmonston, "Advent and the Grace of Delayed Gratification," *FaithandLeadership.com*, December 1, 2015.

Prayers of the People ~ Sudie Niesen Thompson

God of Abundant Mercy, God of Steadfast Love —

From age to age, you are faithful to us. You — who spoke into the depths of chaos to create us in your image; You — who pitched a tent in the wilderness to dwell in our midst; You — who walked among us to show the fullness of your love; You never tire of drawing near to us! With gratitude we draw near to you, and entrust our highest hopes and deepest longings to your care.

Holy God — As we begin our journey to the cross, we pause to look inward ... and to look outward. We reflect upon our lives, and confess the sin that infects our hearts and separates us from you. We reflect upon our common life, and confess the brokenness that plagues our communities and mars your vision of *Shalom*. And we reflect upon the life you offer, and consider the ways we can more fully embrace your way and your truth. During this holy season — we return to you, O God ... seeking forgiveness, seeking transformation, seeking wholeness.

Help us let go of the things that keep us from loving you with heart, soul, strength, and mind, and that keep us from loving our neighbors as ourselves. Free us from fears that keep our hearts in a defensive posture; strip us of selfish impulses that privilege our own desires over the community's needs; release us from unrelenting anger that holds our energies hostage, relieve us of unfair expectations that harm others and diminish ourselves. Cultivate space in overcrowded lives for creativity and growth. And nurture within us gifts of compassion, generosity, love, and joy so that — with every breath, with every word, with every deed — we might serve and glorify you.

As we embark on this Lenten journey, send your Spirit to accompany us, just as you accompanied Jesus during his forty days in the wilderness. Guide our feet, sustain our spirits, and keep us faithful to the way of Christ. Draw near to us, as we seek to draw near to you, and uphold us with your grace.

This we pray in the name of your Son, our Lord, who gave us words to pray:

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory, forever. Amen.