

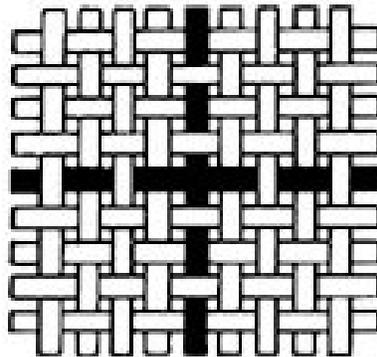


# SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

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THE VERY REV. STEVEN L. THOMASON, DEAN AND RECTOR  
THE FIRST SUNDAY IN LENT, FEBRUARY 18, 2018  
GENESIS 9:8-17; PSALM 25:1-9; 1 PETER 3:18-22; MARK 1:9-15

## THE WARP AND WEFT OF LENTEN REALITY



**Mark 1:9-15** [*In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him. Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news."*]

Most years, the turn into Lent unfolds for me across the time and space of a few weeks. Not until about the third week of Lent do the warp and weft of Lent's cruciform reality shake me sufficiently to feel like I am really on a

journey to the cross. Some years, I seem to just skate across the surface of Lenten meaning, which also inevitably leads to a flattening of Easter joy. The two are

inexorably linked, which is why we hold fast to this Lenten part of the Paschal Mystery.

But this year has been different—Lent was sort of front-loaded for me, a confluence of things that helped bring it into focus more readily, and here on this First Sunday of Lent, I'm reflecting on what is different, and why.

Perhaps it is because Ash Wednesday came earlier than most years—pushed into the first half of February by a Passover moon's determined nudge on this fragile earth, and on my earthly existence. I've heard many of you say Lent crept up on you; it seemed premature. I get that, and yet is there something in the surprise of unreadiness that is worth noting?

Perhaps it was my trip to Arkansas in late January to visit my ailing father, and seeing the cumulative effects of eighty-plus years of gravity's incessant battle to inter him once again, dust to dust. A natural thing, and a sure outcome, but the mortal image of an aging parent is surely a stark one, and a Lenten one for us all to consider.

Perhaps it was my own surgery ten days ago that prepped me for Lent—a simple outpatient procedure, for which I asked your prayers and was grateful for them. The

surgery went well, I am fine, but that moment before the anesthesiologist gives you general anesthesia, that moment when you are aware of having no control, when time stops and space yields its dimension dimensionality to dreamless sleep, and you are left with thoughts that are stripped as bare as you are on the operating table—that is surely a Lenten moment, and I can say standing here this morning that I am grateful for the experience coming when it did, on the cusp of our Lenten journey.

Those thoughts, that moment, that formless space—surely they are bound up in Lenten meaning, as is the awakening on the other side. Again, Paschal Mystery...

Perhaps it was walking through the nave this past Monday to see these Stations of the Cross being hung on the wainscoting. I knew they were coming; I've been involved in the process from inception, but these sculpted pieces, hanging on these walls, in this sacred space stopped me short.

As pieces of art you must decide whether or how they influence you—but my sincere hope is that you will engage them, as part of your Lenten journey this year. We are honored to have the artist Virginia Maksimowycz with us today, offering a

forum at 10 a.m. and a special communal walk of the stations at 2:30 today. But they will be here through Good Friday, for your engagement, to assist you in the work of Lent.

Lent is a time and space that we mark differently. The invitation to observe a holy Lent is to set it apart, to measure time and space in ways that stop you short, that prompt reflection on what really matters in life, to walk in the world keenly aware of the crucifixions that will occur today.

You've heard me say more than once that Lent is not about giving something up in and of itself. If I give up chocolate, only to think more about chocolate, then I've missed the point. It's just gimmick, and I don't think we find God lingering much in the valley of gimmicks.

But if that which I gave up creates space and time for me to contemplate my spiritual journey more deeply, then maybe it will break me open to this Lenten experience. And we make the way to the cross as Christians, as the Church. For all its shortcomings, the Church has held fast to this Lenten season as a time to address very honestly the fact that death is a part of life and to deny that truth may delay our dealing with it, but it will not prevent it.

These Stations of the Cross intrude into our serene space of worship and into our lives. Mary's face in her hands at Station IV could be that of a mother mourning the death of her son by lethal injection in the prison's execution chamber, or she could be an immigrant in our detention center waiting to be deported, wondering when or if she will see her children again, or she could be an addict wearied by the haunts of her relentless demon. Or she could be a mother in Florida who tries this morning to envision what life will be like in the wake of her child's untimely death in a high school this week.

What has she to say to us here, today? What might we say in return?

Or the bare leg at Station VII could be that of a bound and broken Jesus falling to the ground in exhaustion, or it could be that of a young man climbing from his tent under the Ballard bridge, wondering if he will be safe from attack today, or it could be one attempting to rise from the pavement having been tackled by overly zealous authorities of our day. What happens when you meet this man's eyes on the street today?

These Stations of the Cross intrude into our serene space of worship and into our lives, because they remind us of how cruel our

world still is, and how indifferent we can be to that cruelty if we close in on ourselves. The way of the cross never closes in on itself; rather, it is always one of open vulnerability, willing to embrace the sufferings of the world.

And so I'd say let this season of Lent intrude into your life. Be unsettled by it, but for a purpose.

The Great Litany, the penitential order, the changes to our liturgical flow, the violet color of spilled blood, all of it is intended to help us set this season apart, as one of weighty meaning, and connection.

If time warps a bit this Lent and you slow down to find a different cadence to the cross, then count it as a gift of mercy, for you and those whom you encounter, and watch what happens in your life.

If your world twitches anxiously when you ponder death—in its universality and its specific grip on you—then count it as a special portal into the paschal mystery, and consider how that perspective shapes your approach to life.

Because Lent only makes sense by the light of Easter, and here on this First Sunday of Lent, even now, we trust that the paschal mystery stirs in a measure of hope for us by which we can make our way, because in the paschal mystery, we trust that God gathers the whole world up in loving embrace, such that nothing is lost, no one is lost.

And for that may God's holy name be praised. Amen.



SAINT MARK'S  
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