

Gracious God, open our ears that we may hear your truth, open our eyes that we may see your kingdom, and open our hearts and minds that we might know the cries of our brothers and sisters who are hungry, and hurting, and sometimes even dying without the knowledge of your love for them. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts together be pleasing in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

Welcome to the first Sunday in Lent. Not *of* Lent, but *in* Lent. Lent is the season of 40 days between Ash Wednesday and Easter (not including Sundays). Lent is observed by the liturgical church as a time of preparation and a time of penitence. Beginning in the early church, Lent is when converts to the faith were trained in the faith as they prepared for baptism at the conclusion of the Easter vigil. The 40 days reflect the fasting period that Jesus observed in the wilderness where he was tempted by the devil as we heard in our lesson from the Matthew this morning.

This marks the first Sunday since Ash Wednesday when I joined with the Reverend John Oldham at Simpson UMC for their first Lenten Luncheon services. I assisted with the imposition of the ashes to remind us that “from dust we have come and to dust we shall return.” I invite you to participate with these noontime worship services as various preachers from around the community will be preaching on the Seven Last words of Christ in a very simple service of worship followed by a simple meal of soup and sandwiches. I will be preaching on March 11 on the theme of Relationship.

This also marks the first Sunday of our Lenten worship series, “Boot Camp for the Soul.” Boot Camp tests an individual both physically and mentally in ways that are designed to break down their individuality. It molds them into the men and women that the services need them to be. In other words, one of the purposes of boot camp is to subjugate the “I” so that the “we” and the

camaraderie of the group becomes paramount. In a way, that is what Lent is about as well.

Our theme for this Sunday is “The Need for Change.” Lent reminds us of the need to change our life, to change our ways in order to build and strengthen the relationship between us and God. It is a time to remind us that we are redeemed by Christ and his action on our behalf. It reminds us that our salvation is a gift, a gift that we should not squander. But we do squander the gift. The gift of forgiveness of our sin. The forgiveness of the dark stain on our life that involves our unwillingness to give up control... to “let go and let God” if you will.

Psalm 32, our lectionary psalm for today reads:

*Happy are those whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered. Happy are those to whom the Lord imputes no iniquity, and in whose spirit there is no deceit.*

*While I kept silence, my body wasted away through my groaning all day long. For day and night your hand was heavy upon me; my strength was dried up as by the heat of summer. Selah*

*Then I acknowledged my sin to you, and I did not hide my iniquity; I said, “I will confess my transgressions to the Lord,” and you forgave the guilt of my sin. Selah*

*Therefore let all who are faithful offer prayer to you; at a time of distress, the rush of mighty waters shall not reach them. You are a hiding place for me; you preserve me from trouble; you surround me with glad cries of deliverance. Selah (Psalm 32:5-7, NRSV)*

The psalmist reminds us that our sins are forgiven and that there is joy and happiness in that for us. In the Gospel text, we find the story of Jesus’

temptation in the wilderness. Three times the devil temps him and three times Jesus refuses to fall for the temptation, even in his weakened state.

The temptations that we face on a daily basis are not quite so grand. In fact, they are usually pretty small in the grand scheme of things. And they are individual to us. Yet, do we fudge a little and then claim “the devil made me do it” as Flip Wilson’s Geraldine character used to claim back in the day?

As a church, do we believe that we are too small, or too old, or too tired, or too whatever the excuse may be to engage in the work that God is calling us to do in this community? That is a temptation that is real for us. The temptation to avoid change, to live in the status quo is real for us as well. I spent Friday evening and all day Saturday with about 100 other Missional Network leaders in Kingsport. We trained about how we can use these Missional Networks to reach our communities and work toward our goal to make disciples of Jesus Christ... disciples whose life will be transformed by the Gospel message and who will then transform the world, one life at a time. I’ll be sharing more information with our leadership team in the coming weeks as we explore ways of working with our missional network which consists of McFarland, Simpson, Ft Oglethorpe, Flintstone and St Elmo. I’m also going to try and see if we can get Newnan Springs involved too.

One of our trainers was Anne Bosarge, from the South Georgia Conference and author of “Get Out of that Box!” She told us a parable written by the philosopher, Søren Kierkegaard, “The Parable of the Geese.”

*"A certain flock of geese lived together in a barnyard with high walls around it. Because the corn was good and the barnyard was secure, these geese would never take a risk. One day a philosopher goose came among them. He was a very good philosopher and every week they*

*listened quietly and attentively to his learned discourses. 'My fellow travelers on the way of life,' he would say, 'can you seriously imagine that this barnyard, with great high walls around it, is all there is to existence?*

*I tell you, there is another and a greater world outside, a world of which we are only dimly aware. Our forefathers knew of this outside world. For did they not stretch their wings and fly across the trackless wastes of desert and ocean, of green valley and wooded hill? But alas, here we remain in this barnyard, our wings folded and tucked into our sides, as we are content to puddle in the mud, never lifting our eyes to the heavens which should be our home.*

*The geese thought this was very fine lecturing. 'How poetical,' they thought. 'How profoundly existential. What a flawless summary of the mystery of existence.' Often the philosopher spoke of the advantages of flight, calling on the geese to be what they were. After all, they had wings, he pointed out. What were wings for, but to fly with? Often he reflected on the beauty and the wonder of life outside the barnyard, and the freedom of the skies.*

*And every week the geese were uplifted, inspired, moved by the philosopher's message. They hung on his every word. They devoted hours, weeks, months to a thoroughgoing analysis and critical evaluation of his doctrines. They produced learned treatises on the ethical and spiritual implications of flight. All this they did. But one thing they never did. They did not fly! For the corn was good, and the barnyard was secure!" (Get Out of that Box, p 98-99).*

Hear that ending again, "But one thing they never did. They did not fly! For the corn was good, and the barnyard was secure!" Anne asked us to reflect

upon how often we have failed to venture out into the world seeking creative ways to bring Christ to the lost? How often do we chose not to fly into unknown ventures because we're comfortable, secure, and well-fed right where we are?

Lent is a season for reflection. It is a season for us to rediscover, reconnect, and remember not only who we are, but whose we are. I'm looking forward to the journey. And I look forward to journeying with you.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.