

The Second Sunday in Lent-Year B-The Rev. Jennifer B. Cleveland 2.25.24

We aren't wasting any time this Lent. The Gospel of Mark tends to cut right to the chase of matters and this particular gospel on this second Sunday of Lent is no different. There are many sharp contrasts and paradoxes in this short reading from Mark, but at the center, the point (once again) seems to be that our perspective might be limited or even upside down when it comes to God's heart and dream. There just might be much more in store for us and all of creation than we can ever imagine. *From my vantage point*, says the Heartbeat of the Universe, *Those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it.* It sounds intriguing, until it's hard. The Episcopal priest Cynthia Bourgeault, in reference to this way of the cross, perhaps with a bit of a twinkle in the eye, says, "We can be magnanimous, we can be friendly, we can be very spiritual, until the moment when our ass is on the line and then bang! It's backtrack fast." She, too, is known for cutting to the chase. She describes this way of saving and losing life, this way of Jesus like this: when you stay in it, when "you don't deter from love because of your fear... love becomes the stronger principle" (See *The Church Cracked Open: Disruption, Decline and New Hope for Beloved Community*, Stephanie Spellers, p. 95 and Cynthia Bourgeault, *Insights at the Edge: Encountering the Wisdom Jesus* podcast)

I have been wondering what that might have meant for Abraham and Sarah—to *not deter from love because of their fear*—in this particular moment. They had been incredibly faithful, following God for years by the time we get to this moment. They had traveled with their given names, Abram and Sarai, for a long time—99 years! But after so much time, after so many years of journeying with God around the desert, so many years of being together—maybe when all they wanted to do was curl up and take an afternoon nap or hear those words, "Well done, good and faithful servants,"—God says, "I am not done yet. There is more unfolding afoot. Your names do not fully embrace all that you are still becoming." In this moment, God (again) extends an even bigger vision. All that has come before has brought them to this point of more love. Of going in even deeper. The new name is a sign of another new beginning.

I am reading Sharon Brous's new book, *The Amen Effect: Ancient Wisdom to Mend Our Broken Hearts and World*. She is one of the most well-known rabbis in the U.S. and the list of those offering "advance praise" in the first pages of the book includes Presiding Bishop Michael Curry. A couple of years ago, for Yom Kippur, the most high, holy Day of Atonement for Jews, she invited Bryan Stevenson to do a dialogue sermon with her to discuss the nature of forgiveness and repair in this world. She also wanted him to speak about where he finds hope in the midst of it all. As many of you know, Bryan Stevenson is the executive director of the Equal Justice Initiative in Montgomery, Alabama, the author of *Just Mercy*, and founder of the National Memorial for Peace and Justice and the Legacy Museum. The Legacy Museum is the museum that holds soil—ordinary and sacred—collected from lynching sites (including, I believe, some of the soil collected from the spot in Coos Bay, Oregon, where a man named Alonzo Tucker was lynched in 1903. The Coos History Museum, too, has a jar containing the soil from the site of Mr. Tucker's lynching.) In describing their Yom Kippur sermon, she writes how

Bryan talked about the time he sent one volunteer, a “middle-aged Black woman, to a remote site in West Alabama to collect soil. As she knelt on the ground to begin, a white man in a truck drove by, slowed down, and then stopped his truck and turned around. She was terrified when this man pulled over and approached her, asking what she was doing. With all of her courage, she replied, ‘This is where a Black man was lynched in 1937, and I’m going to honor his life.’

“The man paused and then—to her surprise—asked if he could help her. He knelt down by her side and picked up soil with his hands, carefully placing it in the jar. When she began to cry, he apologized for upsetting her. “No, no, no you’re blessing me.” The two of them dug. Finally, he turned to her and said, “I’m just so worried that it might have been my grandfather who participated in lynching this man.” Now they wept together. At the end of the day, they returned to Montgomery together, to place the jar of soil in the museum exhibit, where it stands today.”

Rabbi Brous asks, “How was this woman able to see the man’s humanity through her own anguished heart? How was he able to see her through his own guilt and shame?” It is an instance in which neither the man nor the woman were deterred because of fear. Love became the stronger principle. Rabbi Brous goes on to say, “By digging up that soil, together, they [were] putting to rest an old story and laying the foundation for a new one. Bestowing dignity upon those whose lives were taken, and with love, planting a new future. That is precisely what we must now do. Put to rest an old story—loneliness, isolation, polarization, and extremism, broken politics, and ailing spirit—and in its place, lay the foundation for a new story. One in which we see each other in all our bruises and all our beauty. See each other not despite our broken hearts but precisely because our hearts are broken, too.” (p. 175-178) The new story is a sign of another new beginning, where love becomes the stronger principle, not by denying our humanity, but by more fully embracing our humanity and that of others.

Every once in awhile, the Episcopal Church comes out with a revised edition of a book titled the *Book of Occasional Services*. It is a companion to the *Book of Common Prayer*. It is filled with prayers and services that don’t happen frequently or don’t happen everywhere, but when a congregation wants or needs them, this book is ready and waiting, as a resource. Some things in the book have been there for years, like the blessings used at the end of the service during Advent and Easter, or the solemn prayer we are currently using at the end of each service during Lent. Advent Lessons and Carols comes from this book, as do prayers for home blessings, animal blessings, the blessing of water for the baptismal font, quinceañeras, and much, much more. (The book is filled with a lot of blessings.) New services have been added over the years. One of the newer liturgies is called *A Service of Renaming*.

The introduction to this Service of Renaming says this: *When an event or experience leads a baptized person to take or to be given a new name, the following may be used to mark this transition in the parish community.*

The presider says: Blessed be the God of Sarai revealed as Sarah, Jacob who became Israel, and Simon called Peter.

The response of all those gathered is this: Blessed be the God who comes among us, reconciles us, and sets us free.

The person taking on a new name then says: I am a new creation, grateful to embody Christ's image.

Then, all those gathered hear these words: We are here to affirm the name of this person. This name expresses who they are and who they are becoming, through the grace of God.

Just as Abram and Sarai needed new names to become a new creation, sometimes our names become a touchpoint for how God is saying, *I have more in store for you as you continue to live into love, live into becoming a new creation.* And sometimes the seemingly small, but holy and healing actions like digging up soil from a 120-year old lynching site become the clearest reflections of a new chapter in the story of love becoming the stronger principle. It happens in so many ways.

From my vantage point, says the Heartbeat of the Universe, *Those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it.*