Yr. B, Lent 1
February 18, 2024
Preached by Furman Buchanan
Christ Episcopal Church
1424 Words

Lessons:
Genesis 9:8-17
Psalm 25:1-10
1 Peter 3:18-22
Mark 1:9-15

"*Ouch*, that's too tight!" …is what you say when your friend cinches the blindfold on the back of your head. Maybe it was too tight and felt uncomfortable. Or maybe you wanted it loosened enough so you could peek out the bottom. The bridge of my nose helped created tiny gaps between the bandana and my cheekbones. I could see, but only a little bit. I still had to listen carefully in order to find my way.

Do you remember playing 'Hide the Handkerchief'? In an earlier generation it was called 'Hide the Thimble'. Our Millennials and Gen Z parishioners are whispering to one another right now. *"What's a thimble?"* Y'all—it's that tiny metal thing-y that fits on your thumb when you're sewing to prevent the needle from stabbing you.

Even earlier generations called this game 'Huckleberry Bean Stalk'. Anybody? Other times it was called 'hot buttered beans'. *"What are butter beans?"* Don't ask that question out loud around here. We're in the Low Country—butter beans are *almost* considered to be a sacrament!

If you still don't know the game I'm talking about, it's the one where blind-folded children compete to find an object with minimal guidance from the child who hid the object. "Warmer," she would say to someone moving in the right direction. "Colder," she would call out to another child wandering away from the target. "You're getting hot," she'd shout to a player who was getting close. I remember hearing, "Ice, ice, cold!" which meant I was hopelessly far away, and needed to go in a *different direction*—and fast!

The Creator of heaven and earth was sick and tired of all the human violence. So sick and so tired that God wanted to start *all over* with a clean slate. Noah and his family were the fortunate people whom God asked to help out. And because God loves all the animals, Noah was given a filthy job. He had to round up all those animals—and eat with 'em and sleep with 'em, *more likely*—stay awake at night with 'em…all on that giant, stinkin' ark. I mean that part literally. You *know* it had to stink! But, let's face it—it was still much better than the alternative!

Warmer.

Do you ever find yourself in a difficult spot, feeling overwhelmed, but forgetting how your situation still compares quite well with what could've been? Say your prayers. The word that comes back might just be '**warmer**.'

Still, Noah felt impatient for obvious reasons. So, he sent out a raven and then a dove to search for dry land. They went to and fro, but found nothing.

Colder.

Are you disappointed that the thing you want most—maybe even the thing you *need* most—is proving to be elusive? Keep steady. Be faithful. Even when it feels like the word in your heart is '**colder**,' remember that the point of this word is *to help*—it's to *help us find our way*.

Noah waited seven days and sent out a dove which, *this time,* came back with an olive leaf in its beak. Look! A little sign of hope!

Warmer! Warmer!

This is what faithful living is about, dear people. It's about remaining open to signs of hope that point us in new directions. Yall, a journey of faith is not a simple, straight line as some want to think. It is not about slam-dunk certainty…as some folks are tempted to believe.

According to the Scriptures, we are *not* given certainty by God. Instead, we are given assurances, promises, signs of hope which still require us to trust. The ultimate sign of hope for Noah—and for every future generation, including ours—is that big, beautiful rainbow in the clouds.

All through my childhood and through much of my adulthood, I thought of the rainbow like a bow and a ribbon on a package. Actually, this morning's sacred story is teaching us that it's a bow—as in a bow *with arrows*…a weapon of violence that God has hung up *for good*…a threatening weapon of destruction that God has set down *forever*!

When we look up at that giant, *abandoned* weapon...when we behold that beautiful promise in the clouds, it's as if God is saying, "You're getting **hot, hot, hot**!" In other words, when we see the rainbow, we are very close to discovering the truth of God's deep, passionate desire to give us life and peace for evermore.

"Never again will I destroy all flesh," says the LORD. "Never *again*," says the LORD. "*Never* again!" Listen—when the LORD says something three times in a row, it's a real good bet! I think we can trust that the LORD *has* hung up the bow for good….and *forever*. *And* the LORD also invites our active, ongoing participation in this kind of life and peace.

"Show me *your ways*, O LORD," the Psalmist is inviting us to pray. "Teach me *your paths*!"

Warmer!

"Lead me in *your truth* (O LORD), for you are the God of my salvation!"

Warmer!

"*All the paths* of the LORD are love *and* faithfulness to those who keep his covenant."

Hot! Hot! Hot!

Welcome to Lent! Please know that this season is *not* about beating yourself up. This season is *all about* committing ourselves to a faith journey with Jesus Christ. I'm giving you a possible road map, printed on bright yellow paper in the back! *Follow that map* and join all the rest of us who are reading the Gospel according to St. John this Lent.

You can *still* jump on the bus, even if you didn't get your map on Ash Wednesday. It won't take much time for you to catch up on reading Thursday, Friday, and Saturday. I designed it that way on purpose!

Here's my theory. If we spend even a little quality time with prayer and reading about the life and ways of Jesus Christ, we will become more likely to hear his encouraging voice, saying "**Warmer**!" and to keep on moving in the right direction.

Even if we spend as little as ten minutes becoming better acquainted with the life and teachings of Jesus, then we will be more likely to hear when his compassionate voice says, "**Colder**!" and we'll know that it's time to turn in a different direction.

And so, *together*, we will be making our way on this twisting, turning faith journey toward the promise of the resurrection (which *is* abundant life and peace)!

But first, let's go back—way back to "those days (when) Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan." Let's go back to that moment when "he saw the heavens torn *apart* and the Spirit descending like a dove…and that voice came from heaven, "You are *my Son*, the *Beloved*; with you I am *well pleased*."

Translation? **Hot! Hot! *Scorching* Hot!**

And then *immediately* the Spirit drove Jesus out into the wilderness. Now wait a minute! That doesn't sound right! You see, we're *tempted* to think that this was some kind of **cold, cold** detour, but we would be wrong about that.

I'm telling you *because the Bible is telling us*—that the journey of faith is **not** some simple, straight line. The biblical truth about journeys of faith is that they involve many, *many twists and turns* in the road…*and they also* include promises and signs of hope along the way.

Yes, Jesus was tempted by Satan. *Yes*, Jesus was stuck out there in the wilderness with the wild beasts. AND the angels of our Father in heaven were *with him* every step of the way. So that, when Jesus came back home to Galilee, he was able to speak the truth that we need so desperately to hear. Jesus was powerfully equipped to proclaim the Good News that the Kingdom of God has come *near*…it is *here* and *now*…not just *up there* and *out there* in the future.

And so it makes perfect sense for Jesus to then say, Repent! Which means…"*Turn around!"*

"Look! Take off your blindfold and see!" Alas, we have discovered the prize we have been looking for…the gift of Christ, the One who—according to St. Peter's letter—has brought *all of us*—all of us unri*ghteous people*—into the very presence of God.

What do you know? We *can* see it…and we can *believe it*. Because of Jesus Christ, we already belong in God's *blessed Kingdom*—a place of abundant life and peace where we *get to be* active, ongoing participants…here and now…and forever more.

Amen.