

“LIVING LENT as People of the Resurrection: Ponder”
Psalm 51:1-4, 7-12; Luke 5:27-32

Jesus went out and saw a tax collector named Levi, sitting at the tax booth. And he said to him, “Follow me.” And leaving everything, he rose and followed him. And Levi made him a great feast in his house, and there was a large company of tax collectors and others reclining at table with them. And the Pharisees and their scribes grumbled at his disciples, saying, “Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?” And Jesus answered them, “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I have not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance.”

Introduction

Welcome to Lent 2016. We gather to begin our 40-day-plus-6-Sunday journey to the Cross and Empty Tomb (didn't we just finish celebrating Christmas! It feels like we just arrived in Bethlehem). But this journey will be very different ... a bit more subdued and reflective ... a time to quiet ourselves and PONDER. During Lent, we are asked to take an honest look in the mirror to see our true selves: created by God in his goodness and grace. Psalm 139 says it, “I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful, I know that full well.” Yet we are also seriously fallen. The Bible says in Romans 3, “For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” So we begin Lent by calling out with David in Psalm 51. We read it together: “Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy—blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin.” “Honest to God,” we say, because we need the forgiveness that our Savior offers.

Frederick II was an 18th century king of Prussia. There's what we call an “urban legend” of the king touring a Berlin prison when he was greeted by the cries of some prisoners. They fell on their knees, protesting their unjust imprisonment. Frederick noticed a solitary figure in a corner, unmoved by the king's presence. He asked him, “Why are you here?” “Armed robbery, your majesty.” “Are you guilty?” “Yes, your majesty. I deserve my punishment.” Hearing the prisoner's honesty, Frederick called for the jailor. “Release this man at once,” he said, “I'll not have him kept in prison corrupting all the fine, innocent people who occupy it!”

An amusing irony. But this could be a story that suggests we look into that mirror to see the illusions we tend to create when we “cover up” our true self with the claim of innocence?

The power of Lent is naming the problem and pondering our need for God. Lent is meant to be a journey that takes us through the rejection and suffering and death and of Jesus. Lent is our opportunity to say, “Yes, your majesty, I am guilty, lost in the wilderness of my sin and in need of redemption.”

I. David (Psalm 51)

In David's Psalm 51, we hear him recognize his brokenness and his need for God to restore him in mercy and grace. King David's adulterous affair and tragic cover-up was exposed by Nathan the prophet in II Samuel 12. Then Nathan said to David, "You are the man! This is what the LORD, the God of Israel, says: 'I anointed you king over Israel, and I delivered you from the hand of Saul. Why did you despise the word of the LORD by doing what is evil in his eyes?'" Caught and confronted.

David pondered his own betrayal of God's community. Pride and lust caused him to take what did not and should not belong to him. David also betrayed the Lord and the trust God had placed in his leadership. Psalm 51 followed with a reflection of raw honesty. Because no one can hide from God, David hid nothing in his confession. And note: he offered no bargaining, no claim of innocence, no excuse! We hear only a cry for God's mercy and forgiveness.

Moving toward the Cross over the next few weeks, we can begin our Lenten journey by putting our busy and distracted lives on pause, at least for a few moments each day. Ponder your relationship with God and your relationships with others in your life. David's heartfelt cry for mercy can become our cry of confession as well.

Someone likened spiritual renewal during Lent to a path "home," a path to our true self. The Lord invites us to return. You and I can discover again the God who loves us no matter how far we have strayed.

Here is a Lenten prayer, the Lenten hope. Did you hear it and feel it when we read it? "Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me. Cast me not away from your presence, and take not your Holy Spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and uphold me with a willing spirit."

II. Levi (Matthew)

We read in Luke 5 when "Jesus went out and saw a tax collector named Levi (also known as Matthew), sitting at the tax booth. And he said to him, 'Follow me.' And leaving everything, he rose and followed him."

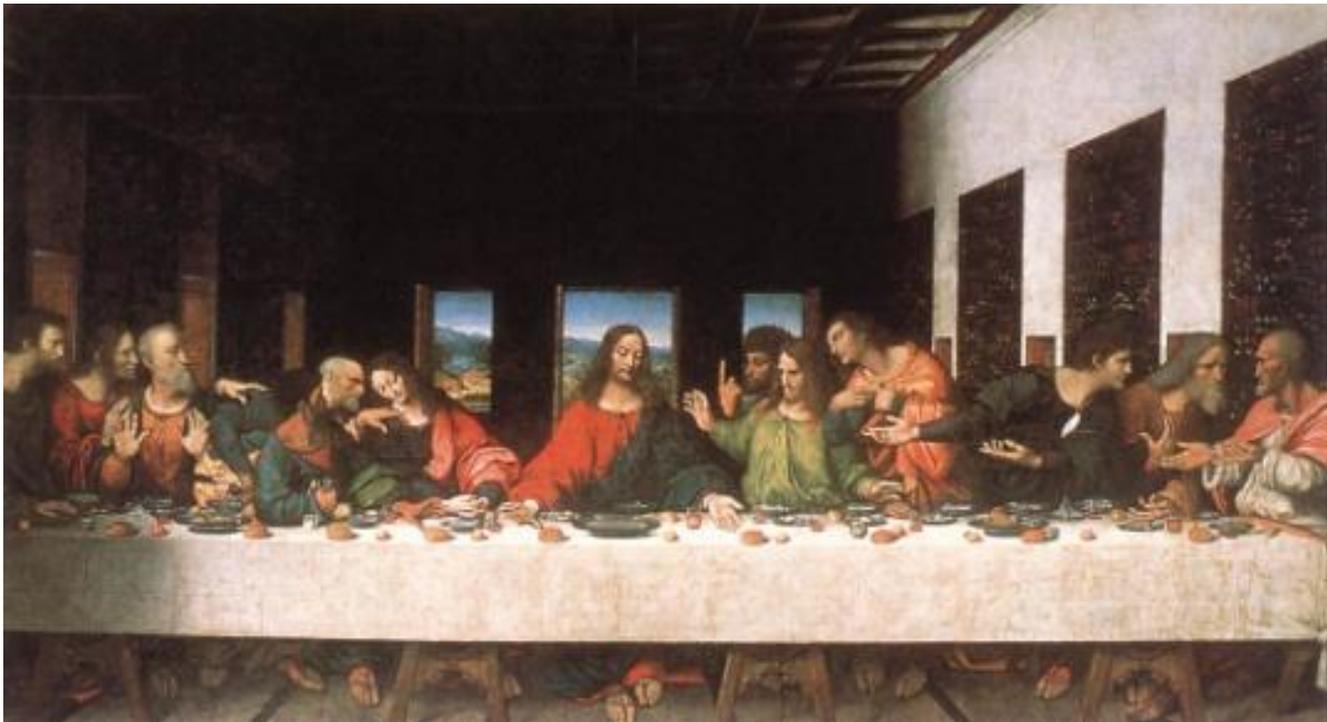
Levi, most likely, had heard Jesus teach before this encounter. Remember how often "tax collectors and sinners" were synonymous. Levi knew that. Perhaps they'd had a conversation. In Luke 4 it says that in Galilee "news about Jesus spread through the whole countryside" and how Jesus was "teaching in their synagogues" and how "everyone praised him." Leading up to this calling of Levi, Jesus preached in Nazareth, healed many in Capernaum, taught on the shores of the Sea of Galilee. "And news about him spread throughout the surrounding area. So, when Levi-Matthew gave it up, left everything and followed Jesus, it was an informed decision.

What are you “giving up for Lent?” There’s this long tradition of giving up something for this 40 day journey that would help following Jesus in a better way. Here are a few of the top 100 answers from a recent survey. Which ones do think would or would not help one’s Christian life? #1 answer... school; #2-chocolate; #3-twitter; #4-alcohol; #5-social networking. Giving up swearing, fast food, boys, Netflix and giving up Lent itself were in the top 25. A few interesting ones were giving up life, feelings, people, hope, sobriety, complaining, sarcasm, caring, and the 100th answer... church. (so yeah, if it’s ok with you, I’m giving up church for Lent)☺.

After giving up the tax collecting business and the Roman oppression it brought to his own people, it says that Levi made for Jesus “a great feast in his house, and there was a large company of tax collectors and others reclining at table with them.” Levi wanted his friends and associates to meet Jesus and hear what he had to say. Perhaps this is something you and I can take up for Lent! Invite some friends over and have a conversation on the life and teachings of Jesus.

“But the Pharisees and their scribes grumbled at his disciples, saying, ‘Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?’ And Jesus answered them with one of his amazing, provocative, challenging and insightful sayings, “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I have not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance.”

Leonardo da Vinci's *The Last Supper* is one of the most admired, most studied, and most reproduced paintings the world has ever known. He painted it while in Milan in the 1490s.



Another “urban legend” goes something like this. When da Vinci was painting his masterpiece, he selected a young man to sit for the character of Jesus. Pietri Bandinelli was his name. Pietri was chosen

because of his humble and gentle spirit. This is how he Leonardo imagined Jesus. Years later, when he had only one character yet to paint, Judas Iscariot, he found his model on the streets of Rome, a man who matched his image of a betrayer with shoulders bent to the ground and an expression that was cold and sullen. At his sitting while da Vinci painted, the man was agitated. He looked around the studio and his expression turned to sadness. Da Vinci asked, “Why can’t you sit still? What is wrong with you?” The man walked over to the painting, pointed to the image of Jesus’ face and said, “Look how much I have changed. Today you chose me to model as Judas Iscariot but 20 years ago, I, Pietri Bandinelli, was your model for Christ!” (actually, *The Last Supper* was completed in 3 to 5 years). The sinful life he had lived had so disfigured the face that had first attracted da Vinci, he now thought it to be the most villainous in the whole of Rome. (actually it all took place in Milan). Yet, this tragic tale of a lost life became for Pietri his season of Lent.

There is a Pietri, a Levi and a King David in all of us and we have the mark of sin to prove it. In this time of reflection and confession, there is much to ponder. We do so not to beat ourselves up but to be free of the things that bind us.

Conclusion

What a gift of grace to ponder! The word of God assures us, “The wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in our Lord Jesus Christ” (Romans 6:23). The next steps on our Lenten path focus on the 15th chapter of Luke—the great message of the lost being found. May this quiet journey, this journey of pause and pondering, lead you into mercy, renewal and the celebration of being claimed and named by God as you live Lent as people of the resurrection.

So, let us pray with and for one another.