

Letter from Dad

PPC

Lent 1B

21 February 2021

Psalm 25:1-10

Mark 1:9-15

The summer that I turned eleven, I spent two weeks at Camp Pinewood, a Girl Scout Camp in Dansville, NY. One day, much to my surprise, I received a letter from my father. Usually, any letter from home was addressed in my mother's handwriting and although she may have gotten my father to sign the letter, I had never received a letter just from him. This was such a momentous event I still remember seeing that letter and feeling surprised and happy. I don't remember what he wrote but included in his letter was a page torn from the NY Times magazine. Years before, they had published a letter that F. Scott Fitzgerald had written to his eleven year old daughter, Scottie, when she was at camp. I was astounded that my father had paid attention to this published letter, that he had saved it, and now sent it to me. My father, a mechanical engineer through and through, was a man of few words. Upon receipt of this letter, though, I recognized that his heart held many words and he wanted to share his feelings with me. I felt enveloped in love as I read Fitzgerald's words given to me by my father.

My mind works in mysterious ways and for some reason as I read this terse account that Mark gives us of the time that Jesus spent in retreat after his baptism, I thought of this letter. Unlike in Luke and Matthew, we don't get details of what went on in the wilderness. Mark, the writer of few words, merely says about this time "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” (Mark 1:12-13). We’re left with many questions, chief among them, perhaps, is “what was Jesus doing during those forty days?”

The lectionary by pairing Psalm 25 with this short reading may help us get a glimpse of the conversation Jesus was having with God. In the words of one commentator, “The psalms provide a glimpse inside the heart and head of the psalmist...We hear the psalmist struggling with fear, anger, frustration, and distress, and then climbing to a secure place of trust, close to the heart of God.”¹

This winter has felt like time in the wilderness. The wild beasts have taken many forms. Haven’t we all been struggling with fear, anger, frustration, and distress? Lent, that time when we are invited to ponder these feelings brings the opportunity for us to examine our prayer life for its honesty in expressing our deepest hopes and beliefs about God.

What, I wondered, would a letter from God to his beloved son share with him? Would God hear the prayers that Jesus offered? What would God want Jesus to know in preparation for his coming ministry? Using the letter of F. Scott Fitzgerald as a guide, here then, is a possible letter written by God and sent to Jesus. You can read the original Fitzgerald letter in your bulletin. I pray that he offers me grace in my rewriting of it!

21 February in the Year of our Lord, 30
Heaven

Dear Yasha,

I feel very strongly about you doing duty. Would you give me a little documentation about your studies in Hebrew? I am glad you are happy - but I never believe much in happiness. I never believe in misery, either. Those are things that you see on the stage or screen or the printed page; they never really happen to you in life.

¹ Kate Huey at: <http://ucc.weeklyseeds.org>.

All I believe in in life is the rewards for virtue (according to your talents) and the punishments for not fulfilling your duties, which are doubly costly. *Remember the lilies of the field...*

I will make sure your experience in the wilderness is a time when you come to know that I will take care of you.

My dearest bubbalah, I will conclude. Things to worry about:

Worry about courage...I know you feel that this call is hard. There you were, working along happily in the carpenter's shop with your brothers, helping put food on the table for your mother and your sisters, loving the time spent with family. Then, you felt my tap on your shoulder and nothing was the same again. Standing up against the status quo, speaking up for the oppressed and the poor and the widowed and the orphaned, this is not how you envisioned spending the remainder of your years. Courage is not about the lack of fear - courage is going forward in the midst of your fear. Remember - I will always be with you. You are not alone in your ministry. I will send disciples to work with you and love you and support you to the best of their ability.

Worry about cleanliness...this is so important in the law because your physical cleanliness reflects on your spiritual cleanliness. The time you spend on keeping yourself clean is time when you are practicing good self-care. This will be imperative as you continue on your journey. What good are you to others if you can't spend time in caring for yourself? I will send my messengers when you are in particular need and they will anoint you with oils, reminding you of the importance of good self-care.

Worry about efficiency...you will go about the countryside proclaiming the day of my reign is here. There are those who will understand this message and arise to the challenge. There are those, however, who will not understand and out of their own fear will work toward your downfall. If you spend time worrying about those who do not understand, you will be overcome with your own fears and depression. Brush the dust from your feet in those places where resistance is the greatest and go on to the next place where perhaps there will be those who have ears to hear and eyes to see.

Worry about horsemanship...don't forget where your pleasure lies. Laugh hard and well - enjoy those times of companionship with your disciples and closest friends. Find those times of solitude when you can meditate on the deepest longings of your heart.

Things not to worry about:

Don't worry about popular opinion...so many voices will be raised against you. "This isn't how it's done...we don't heal on the Sabbath...it's work...we have to do it this way because we always have...you can't sit at table with tax-collectors and prostitutes...it isn't done...what do you mean we should be hospitable to Samaritans?..."

Don't worry about the past...your mother and sisters and brothers will be alright...yes, there are rumors about your illegitimate birth but who you are now is what must concern you

Don't worry about your future...you are called to live in the present moment...teaching and preaching and healing...remember: no matter what happens to you, I will be with you

Don't worry about triumph...yes, it feels good when your followers begin to spread the news of how you can do miracles...these are the ways the devil seduces you...when you begin to believe your own press...when you think of yourself as someone who is more blessed or richer or more loved than others...then you will not hear my voice clearly

Don't worry about insects in general...mosquitoes and flies and other flying pests do exist and are part of my creation...they do what they do because they are...on those days when you feel overwhelmed by too many insect bites or feel overwhelmed by their continual buzzing around, try to let go of your fear and in a quiet, secluded place, seek once again my presence

Don't worry about disappointments...for thousands of years now I have been living with disappointment...humans beings are imperfect...you will be disappointed by those around you who continue to misunderstand your words and your actions...don't be a Monday morning quarterback and second guess your decisions...you did your best and that is all any of my beloved children can do

Don't worry about pleasures...in the same way, if you dwell too long and too hard on finding pleasures in everything you do, you will be disappointed...pleasure comes when you least expect it...look around you...at the sunset, at the sunrise, at the colors of the earth...these pleasures are always available and will be given to you when you need them...

Things to think about:

What am I really aiming at? Are you going about the countryside in ministry for *nachas*, for prideful reasons? Keep your eye on the goal and whatever you do, listen for my voice.if there is silence, listen harder.

With dearest love,
Your adoring *Abba*

"All the paths of God" writes the psalmist "are steadfast love and faithfulness, for those who keep God's covenant and God's decrees" (25:10).

We Protestants are not called upon to fast or “give up” for Lent. Perhaps, though, we can consider what it might mean if we “give it up.” What are those thought patterns; those destructive behaviors that we persist in doing and thinking? How do we resist being in right relationship with others and with God? Lent is about taking that journey through the wilderness, discovering what it is about us and the systems we have constructed that keep us from right relationships.

Faith isn't about outward appearances. The road to heaven isn't paved with a record of how often you have attended church or taken communion. It's about how often we have been gracious to another. My prayers are that each of us find God's voice in our daily living. May we come to know God's ways; may we allow God to lead us down new paths.

Listen for God's voice - it's good to know we may hear it in unexpected places. Like that letter my father sent me so long ago, we may come to know in our hearts and our bones that we are loved. When we are secure in that knowledge, our prayers for the journey will be heard. We will know we are not alone.

AMEN.