

Sermon for March 1, 2020 by Lydia Gajdel
First Sunday in Lent
St. Paul and the Redeemer Episcopal Church

I have a confession to make. And while I know that there is always a place for me within the Episcopal Church and the love of God, it still feels like a risk to tell you that I love Christian Pop music. Bands like Jesus Culture and Hillsong are my secret obsession. Recently I have gotten deep into the subgenre of breathy guys with guitars who love God. Taize-like repetition of catchy refrains that lull me into remembering that I am a beloved child of God. This week as Lent rolled around, I found myself listening to one song in particular over and over and over again. Beautiful Things by Gungor blasted through my headphones as I jammed myself onto the el like a sardine, through my computer speakers as I sat at my desk approving expense reports, through Alexa as I made dinner. Over and over and over again.

You make beautiful things
You make beautiful things out of the dust
You make beautiful things
You make beautiful things out of us

I found myself entranced by the reality of God's love for us in everything we do and everything we are. God makes beautiful things out of the dust of creation, out of the brokenness of our very being. You make beautiful things.

Today marks the first Sunday in Lent. Together we enter into a time of preparation and reflection where we are called upon to name the reality of what it means to be human. What it means to be both beautiful and broken. We are created in the image and likeness of an all-knowing, all-loving God and yet we falter. We are beloved of God and yet we turn our backs. There is a chasm between who we are and who God calls us to be. We are led into the wilderness of Lent, not for self-flagellation or punishment, but to engage in the discipline of paying attention to the beauty God. Paying attention to the work of the Spirit in our lives and where we turn our back on God, willfully and otherwise. God is at work even in our darkness. And it is Lent that leads us to hold our broken bodies and spirits up to the light, waiting and watching for that light to stream through the cracks.

This year we begin our Lenten journey with Matthew's depiction of the Temptation of Christ, a story that has captured hearts and minds for generations, being depicted in art forms from frescos to film. A story that grabs our attention because we as human beings are so deeply acquainted with the reality of temptation. This is where we find Jesus in our gospel today, face to face with the temptations that come with being human. This story comes at the beginning of Jesus's ministry in Matthew. Right before this Jesus is baptized in the Jordan by John the Baptist then is led by the Spirit out into the desert for forty days of fasting followed by a visit from the Devil. When the Devil is done with Him, Jesus goes out to preach and call his first disciples. The temptation of Jesus is set up as an integral part of the beginning of his ministry. He cannot preach the message of God, heal the sick, feed the hungry, or live into his existence as the son of God incarnate until he has come face to face with what it means to be human. Until he has come face to face with the devil who tempts him to widen the gap between himself and God, to prove a point about his individual power and strength for the sake of riches.

And so, we are here, friends, in a time set apart for us to name the reality of what it means to be human in an effort to come closer to understanding what it means to be truly redeemed. Wrapped in the mantle of baptism, we have been sent out into the wilderness to be tempted by all that this life has to offer. And just as Jesus had the angels, we are never alone. Yes, I'm referring to God, but I'm also referring to each one of us and the ways that we connect one another to the divine. Together as a community during this season of Lent we name where we have missed the mark, fallen short, turned our backs to God. Speaking our sins into reality so that we may

better understand how we can continue on the journey towards becoming the people God created us to be. A journey we were never meant to embark on alone.

So, what does it mean to grapple with Lent in community? How are we being called to name our own shortcomings and acknowledge God's presence in our lives? I want to suggest that we approach this season with honesty and tenderness.

We live in a world where strength takes priority. Success is mandatory to the point where it is the minimum, not something to be celebrated. There is no room for failure. And yet, our brokenness takes hold and we fail. We seek false senses of security to the detriment of our relationships. We let anger overpower empathy. We place the desires of this world at the center of our lives, allowing for complacency as we crowd out God. And we act like everything is okay. The season of Lent is about being honest about the fact that it's not. We are asked to be honest with ourselves and God and those we love. Recognize the times when we fail each other. The times when we do not embody the creatures God made us to be. But that is easier said than done. Vulnerability, with God or each other, is really scary.

Which is why I stand before you and ask for tenderness. When we are tender with each other. When we hold each other softly, allowing room for growth and error. Those are the times that we are able to feel God's presence among us the strongest. We may be broken, but we are beloved of God and we should treat each other as if that were the case. That is what Lent is about. Turning towards the love of God as broken, beloved creatures. Being honest about who we are and what we have done and having our failures met with tenderness and redemption.

Two years ago, Ash Wednesday was marked by yet another mass shooting that claimed the lives of 17 people at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida. Anthony Rizzo, first baseman for the Chicago Cubs, traveled from Spring Training in Arizona to his hometown, not as a celebrity, but as a man in mourning who went home to join his family and friends as they grieved the loss of their community. At a vigil, Rizzo delivered a heartfelt speech that embodied the honesty it takes to confront our systems of sin and brokenness in the world and the tenderness and vulnerability it takes for a heart to break in public. Rizzo said, "We don't know who's hiding their sadness or feelings of guilt and loneliness, or who needs help and is too proud or afraid to ask. So we have to be there for each other, we have to cope with our pain, and we have to live each other's pain."

During this Lent we are called to come together to name our sinful acts and systems with honesty and tenderness. These are not answers to our failings, but rather a way of returning to God in the face of them. Bringing our whole selves, beloved and broken, as we enter together into the journey that is the creation of the Kingdom of God.

Amen.