



ST BART'S

A Sermon by
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Fifty Shades of Honest

*Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, February 22, 2015
The First Sunday in Lent: Based on Mark 1:9-15*

The practice of our faith often involves a good bit of pretense—trying to feel something, even to *know* something that we don't truly feel and surely don't know, or sometimes simply pretending that everything is "fine, fine, fine, thank you very much" when in fact things are falling apart and we are scared to death. The very place where we should be able to be most vulnerable somehow gets co-opted as a place where we feel that we must put forward our best.

But, then, happily and just in the nick of time, along comes the season of Lent, a season in which such pretense is not only not required but also is directly contrary to its spirit. In these 40 days we are given *carte blanche* to be who we are in the most unvarnished way. The kick-off day for the season sets the tone. Being ritually reminded that we have come from a pile of dust and shall return to it lets us know that the jig is up and we might as well get serious and real.

It's not about silly or pretend solemnity. In fact, if our somber faces are practiced and carefully drawn, we would do as well staying home. The change in the mood of our weekly liturgy occurs for one reason: to underscore the church's annual invitation to us that we be real—real with ourselves and with God. I confess to experiencing the call of Lent each year with a genuine heaviness and some fear, for I know that if I earnestly engage the intention of this holy season, I will indeed be challenged by what I learn about myself and the world. But I also much more importantly know that this annual inward trek lives in my life as one of the best chances I ever have to truly know God.

The gospel narrators had no sense of Lent. No such thing as church seasons existed until long after the gospels were penned. Over the years, though, as the observance of Lent developed, it was with extraordinary wisdom and spiritual insight that the church chose to begin this season with the account of Jesus' temptations, those moments in his life when he struggled most to be authentically who he had come to be. Mark, our narrator today, gives less detail than the other synoptic writers, Luke and Matthew. John, not surprisingly, omits the whole notion of Jesus being tempted to sin. In his full-blown Christology, the scent of such humanness would have threatened the certainty of its narrator. Mark, though, is assiduously cryptic in his details, almost as though to prevent future readers from putting too fine a point on sin. It has been the sad delight of a broken church over the years to know exactly what is right and what is wrong. Mark leaves the impression that Jesus as an individual faced the temptations that were his and avoids focusing on the details. I like that immensely about Mark.

An early claim that Jesus lived without sin became entrenched into our consciousness and liturgy. When we pray the Eucharistic prayer, our proper preface, the seasonal beginning of the mass, claims that we pray *through Jesus Christ our Lord, who was tempted in every way as we are, yet did not sin*. My guess is that this claim is more doctrinal and liturgical than it is real since we also claim the dual identity of Jesus as both fully human and fully divine, a claim that argues against Jesus' perpetual lack of sin. It is not troubling to me that we hold conflicting convictions in the faith. Something as dense, imprecise and ultimate as faith should not be expected to be clear and free of contradiction. Who can say? Regardless, the scene of Jesus being drawn into an interior space to deal with Mark's undisclosed temptations sets the stage for our journeys this year and always into the temptations before us.

Now to be sure, Lent is not all about sin; but when Jesus reappeared after the time in the wilderness, his first words, as remembered in the community of Mark, were, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come

near; **repent**, and believe in the good news." Repentance, that old fashioned and dreaded word, which means to turn, to move in a different and better way, is crucial for us. If in our efforts to be open and inclusive, we give the impression that in our journeys "anything goes," that no change, no turning is ever expected, we are not being true to a fundamental truth in our faith: there is a better way, a holier, more life giving way calling us.

All of us have what we ineloquently refer to as our "stuff"; and if you are suffering the delusion that you do not, please make an appointment with me. I think I can forthwith help you get started on a more honest journey. Everybody has stuff, and no one gets through this life without dealing with it. This stuff, which often presents as temptations, lures us to be other than who we most deeply are. Unfortunately, the conversation makes us squirm and begin to think that someone is about to tell us how we are *supposed* to comport ourselves, which we never like, or perhaps that someone is about to judge us harshly, both possible reasons for part of the pretense we so often find in religious settings. God knows we don't want to be found desperately lacking and doomed. The church has been heavy handed in meting its judgment and condemnation.

These are just some of the reasons we are squirrely about sin. It is complicated for us in part because of hearing early in our lives scriptures like the one we heard a part of this morning from Genesis. Many of us, certainly those reared in the church and even others given how broadly the messaging of the church has permeated our cultural consciousness, grew up with an un-nuanced hearing of the story of Noah. No sweet rainbow at the end of this story can make the preceding details okay. This story says that within the character of God there resides the capacity to decide that human evil is so extreme that all but complete annihilation of the species is acceptable. These devout people, Noah's family, and their chosen animals sashayed on to an ark, as the story goes, and floated off while every other living creature was drowned, a dreadful death—all at the hand of God. Of course we don't literally believe such a thing—or at least I hope we don't, but it keeps getting told as though it were an unambiguous truth. It's a terrible story that should never be taught to children or anyone else save as an example of an ancient and unevolved people's attempt to understand the mysteries of God and nature.

In the context of that kind of drama around righteousness or the lack of it, it is not surprising that we are so gun shy about facing in a mature and faithful way the shortcomings of our lives. God wants us to repent not to satisfy an angry and demanding God but so that we might live full, generous, loving lives—holy lives. Whenever one begins to speak of sin, particularly in the church, sex invariably looms nearby. The church has obsessed about it; the world has obsessed about it; Jesus did not obsess about it. Though not having seen the film nor read the books, I presume the fact that *Fifty Shades of Gray* made almost 90 million dollars over the Presidents' Day weekend witnesses the power of sex. Whether the actions in the film are sinful or not is beyond my purview; there is no doubt that there are sexual sins in this world and sometimes in our lives, sins of lust and abuse and infidelity that can destroy others and us.

But I am going to go out on a limb here and say that *for most of us* these aren't the sins that ruin our lives. The transgressions that separate us from God and ourselves most often are much less grand, much less sensational. Our nemeses are the little niggling acts of meanness, pettiness and greed, which slowly eat away at our souls. Lent asks us to look at these. The honest act of admitting these poisons in our lives and turning from them will not change the world, but beyond a doubt honestly doing so will change us. There is no time for lingering; life is too short to give ourselves even one more day to cherished resentments, old grudges, or mean spirits. Lent has come again to bring the promise of the new.

In the name of God: *Amen*.