

**2 Lent, Year B (RCL)**  
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**St. Paul's, Newburyport, MA**

I want to begin this morning by sharing a story from one of my favorite contemporary preachers, The Rev. Barbara Brown Taylor. She told this story in an article in "The Other Side Magazine" a number of years ago. She wrote this:

*"Several summers ago I spent three days on a barrier island where loggerhead turtles were laying their eggs. One night while the tide was out, I watched a huge female heave herself up on the beach and dig her nest and empty her eggs into it. Afraid of disturbing her, I left before she was finished. The next morning I returned to see if I could find the spot where her eggs lay hidden in the sand. What I found were her tracks leading in the wrong direction. Instead of heading back out to sea, she had wandered into the dunes, which were already as hot as asphalt in the morning sun.*

*A little ways inland I found her: Exhausted, all but baked, her head and flippers caked with dried sand. After pouring water on her and covering her with sea oats, I fetched a park ranger who returned with a jeep to rescue her. He flipped her on her back, strapped tire chains around her front legs, and hooked the chains to a trailer hitch on his jeep. Then I watched horrified as he took off, yanking her body forward so that her mouth filled with sand and her neck bent so far back I thought it would break.*

*The ranger hauled her over the dunes and down onto the beach. At the ocean's edge, he unhooked her and turned her right side up. She lay motionless in the surf as the water lapped at her body, washing the sand from her eyes and*

*making her skin shine again. A wave broke over her; she lifted her head slightly, moving her back legs. Other waves brought her further back to life until one of them made her light enough to find a foothold and push off, back into the ocean. Watching her swim slowly away and remembering her nightmare ride through the dunes, I reflected that it is sometimes hard to tell whether you are being killed or saved by the hands that turn your life upside down!"* (Barbara Brown Taylor, in *The Other Side Magazine*, March & April 2000, p. 16)

*It is sometimes hard to tell whether you are being killed or saved by the hands that turn your life upside down..."* All you have to do is look at the chapters that follow our passage from Genesis to see that this might have been a refrain in the life of Abraham and Sarah. In the twilight of their lives they received the covenant of God with its astounding promises, and then they lived with it. At times they were confident, at others nervous, at others, downright horrified. Check out Genesis Chapter 22 where Abraham hears God calling him to take Isaac, the only beloved son and linchpin of the whole covenant, up a mountain as a human sacrifice. The whole idea of it is gut wrenching and the farther the story goes, the more sickening it becomes. And whenever I hear the part about Abraham raising his knife to kill his son, I just want to scream. Did Abraham hear it wrong, or did God really put him to that test? *It is sometimes hard to tell whether you are being killed or saved by the hands that turn your life upside down..."*

This story from Abraham's and Sarah's life is one of what we might call the Bible's texts of terror. As Barbara Brown Taylor puts it, *"These are texts that pry our fingers away from our own ideas about who God should be and how God should act. They leave two things for us to do with our fear: use it to propel us toward the God who is, or let it sink us like a stone."* So, we listen to these biblical texts of terror and we do not find comfort and light. Rather we find our teeth and our hearts put on edge. And we may think something is worn. But it is not. Again, I quote Barbara Brown Taylor:

*"There is a fundamental hope to which the tales of terror drive us: That however wrong they may seem, however misbegotten and needlessly cruel, God may be present in them, working redemption in ways we are not equipped to discern. Our fear of God's method may turn out to be like our fear of the surgeon's knife, which must wound before it can heal. While we would prefer to forgo the pain altogether, our survival depends on our trust in the surgeon's skill. If we believe that the one to whom we surrender ourselves is competent then, in the words of Julian of Norwich, 'all shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well, no matter what.'*

*If we are open to this possibility in our interpretation of Scripture, then we open to the possibility in our lives as well. Whether the terror is heard on Sunday or lived on Monday, the question is the same: Do we trust God to act in all the events of our lives, or only the ones that meet our approval?" (Ibid.)*

*It is sometimes hard to tell whether you are being killed or saved by the hands that turn your life upside down...*" But the covenant undergirds it all – for Abraham and Sarah and for us. That is the only way any of us can hold on during the most terrifying parts of the ride!

*"Get behind me Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things."* Now we are on the road to Jerusalem, among those who are following Jesus, the one it is hoped will bring the fulfillment of the age old covenant between God and Israel, first spoken to Abraham. But here is Jesus talking about suffering and death and those listening are horrified. Peter has said it for all of them. Peter has said, *"No! That can't be the plan!"* Peter's rebuke drew Jesus' fire and Jesus rebuked Peter in return, *"Get behind me Satan!"* And now he is teaching that it will not be just him who will suffer, but all of us if we go any further down this road with him. What kind of Messiah would talk this way? What kind of God would allow is from his chosen one?

Poor Peter – poor disciples, having our ideals about the messiah turned upside down that way. It is disturbing, disorienting... it's downright terrifying. *It is sometimes hard to tell whether you are being killed or saved by the hands that turn your life upside down...*"

The inescapable truth in all of this is that sacrifice and offering are part of every pilgrim's faith journey. Ask anyone who has been at it long and I am sure they will tell you the same. This is not because God wants to see us suffer, but because the way to God is through the suffering that comes with letting go of lesser attachments that block our path with God. But how are we to know what those lesser attachments are? My rule of thumb is that whatever person, place, situation or aspect of myself I am clinging to the most – whatever person, place, situation or aspect of myself I am investing the most energy in – that is what I need to let go of most – that is what I need to offer up to God in prayer.

I have found that this sort of letting go is not easy, but it is simple. And it is necessary. And it is, I think, part of what Jesus is pointing to when he speaks about setting one's mind on divine things rather than on human things. And it is most definitely part of taking up our cross and following Jesus. Because when our hands are free to things that we once clung to, God can fill them with the things he needs us to carry in this world – things that are cross shaped – things like the loving pursuit of justice and peace, when those pursuits are not necessarily popular.

The promise in all of this is a wonderful one. It is not that God will take what we offer and alter it so that we get things just the way we want. And it is not that God will take away all suffering from our lives – in fact our suffering may sometimes increase when we become God’s agents in the world. But the promise is that God will provide what we need to make it through – and not just us, but the generations after us – the covenant will hold.

As with Abraham’s offering of Isaac, and God’s offering of God’s very self in Jesus, God will take what we offer and return it to us too – most likely in ways we would not expect. It may involve the equivalent of that sea turtle’s hair raising ride through the sand dunes. But fear not! God will return what we offer, in God’s own way and time, and then we will see that what we have let go of, the things that we lifted up to God – and indeed our very selves – have been transformed and renamed for glory.

Amen+