



Lookin' for Love in All the Wrong Places

*A Worship Series for Lent
based on readings from RCL Year A*

“Yet even now,” says the Lord, “return to me with all your heart, with fasting...rend your hearts and not your clothing.” — Joel 2: 12-13

The Christian scriptures offer many images of where love, grace, forgiveness, righteousness, and healing can REALLY be found. And it is not in the “usual” places. Isn't it as true of us today as it was of the scriptural authors? Don't we often look for wholeness and happiness in places that offer only temporary “good feelings” and satisfaction?

Lent is a wonderfully reflective time to reassess where we are searching for meaning and purpose. We'll move through stories of Jesus to find out who offers the “real deal.”

Theme song by Mark A. Miller and Lindy Thompson,
“Show Us How to Love”
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Ash Wednesday — Looking for Love

“Yet even now, says the LORD, return to me with all your heart, with fasting... rend your hearts and not your clothing.” — Joel 2:1-2, 12-17

“Whenever you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites. . . . But when you fast, put oil your heads and wash your face...” — Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

Lent begins on Ash Wednesday, a “marker” of the beginning of a journey of self-reflection and discernment, originating in the 11th century church. The journey of repentance is about “turning around” (the origin of the word) so that we might be in right relationship with God. In a sense, we are looking for love once again. When we look to God for love — not simply for the approval of others — and start with our own “turning,” we participate in the “turning around” of the world.

Week One — Look for the Resister

While I kept my silence, my body wasted away through my groaning. . . . Then I acknowledged my sin to you, and I did not hide my iniquity...you are a hiding place for me; you preserve me from trouble; you surround me with glad cries of deliverance. — Psalm 32

“Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil... Jesus said to him, ‘Away with you, Satan! For it is written, ‘Worship the Lord your God, and serve only God.’” — Matthew 4:1-11

The story at the center of our look for love this week is the story of the temptation of Jesus in the desert after his baptism. We see the futility of looking for love in the things that only provide temporary satisfaction — in seeking empty highs, tempting fate, and in mindless adoration. Rather, as Jesus demonstrates, it is in our resistance to evil that we find true communion with God. Resistance to evil starts with our own confession of complicit acts that move us further from love. Our groaning can turn to “glad cries of deliverance” as we choose good over evil time after time — even and especially if it isn’t the “popular” thing to do.

Week Two — Look for the Helper

My help comes from the Lord The Lord is your keeper The Lord will keep your going out and your coming in from this time on and forevermore. — Psalm 121

“You must be born from above. . . . For God so loved the world...” — John 3:1-17

Oftentimes we believe that we must “deserve” the love we receive. We work, work, work to get approval and to feel like our life is justified — pulling our own weight, thinking that whatever life we create and love we get is only what we ourselves can conjure up. But the scriptures today offer the image of God as our “keeper” — always helping, always present. Nicodemus has followed all the rules and done everything HE can do, and yet he is still looking for love — for tangible connection with God. Jesus says that he must be born “of the Spirit.” It’s not all up to simply “doing the right thing!” It is about allowing the Spirit to help birth love in our lives.

Week Three — Look for the Thirst-Quencher

The people thirsted there for water; and the people complained against Moses. . . . The Lord said to Moses...“Strike the rock, and water will come out of it, so that the people may drink.” — Exodus 17:1-7

“Jesus said to her, ‘Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but those who drink of the water that I give them will never be thirsty.’ — John 4:13-14

The Samaritan woman at the well found out that the water she came for was not really the water she needed so desperately. This woman had looked for love in many places, in many faces, and when finally offered a soul-quenching love by Jesus, she became a powerful messenger of Good News. Just as the water given by God that flowed in the desert for the Israelites offered new life, the desert of our lives can be refreshed if we look for love regularly at the well of living water and offer life-giving water to others.

Week Four — Look for the Shepherd

“The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want... You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil...” — Psalm 23

Some of the Pharisees said, “This man is not from God, for he does not observe the sabbath.” But others said, “How can a man who is a sinner perform such signs?” And they were divided. — John 9:1-41

We too often look for security (love) in powerful figures, sure that they can “fix” things for us. It was no different for the people of the First and Second Testaments. They were looking for Kings, Saviors, and Liberators who would offer peace and security in uncertain times. And they often looked “in all the wrong places.” The Pharisees just can’t believe that this trouble-maker, rule-

breaker named Jesus is the One, the Son of God and Savior. Time and again, Jesus uses the metaphor of a Shepherd to teach us how we ought to love and care for each other. No wonder; the Shepherd does what is needed when it is needed, regardless of the “rules.”

Week Five — Look for the Liberator

O Israel, hope in the Lord! For with the Lord there is steadfast love, and with him is great power to redeem. — Psalm 130

“I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live. . . . Lazarus, come out!” The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth, and his face wrapped in a cloth. Jesus said to them, ‘Unbind him, and let him go.’” — John 11:1-45

Sometimes the things we think offer love actually seek to bind us, preventing us from being full and whole and offering our best love to the world. The story of Lazarus, whose funeral shrouds trail him out of the tomb, offer us a metaphor of new life as we recognize that true love is that which unbinds us, that wants for us more, not less, freedom and life. Jesus says to us, “Come out!” Walk! Live! Love! Shed your funeral clothes and offer your deepest self, your deepest love, for the world. Of course this kind of love can be dangerous, as we will see as the events of Holy Week loom closer. But the price of continuing to look for love in the wrong places is higher than the blessing of life lived boldly.

Week Six — Look for the Unexpected

O give thanks to the LORD, for he is good; his steadfast love endures forever! — Psalm 118:1-2, 19-29

When they had come near Jerusalem and had reached Bethphage, at the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples, saying to them, “Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately you will find a donkey tied, and a colt with her; untie them and bring them to me. If anyone says anything to you, just say this, ‘The Lord needs them.’” — Matthew 21: 1-11

The disciples must have been excited and terrified all at once. The entrance into Jerusalem for Passover week had turned into a big deal. How would Jesus be received, by the people and by the authorities? And an entrance can define perception! Surely they would make as big a splash of confidence as possible. And then Jesus asks for a donkey. “A...donkey?!” Once again, Jesus demonstrates a love for peace and a love for common people by creating an

entrance that proclaimed the power of God's "kin-dom of heaven," not Herod's kingdom of oppression. Looking for love? Keep your eyes out for it in unexpected places.

Holy Week — Love Looks for Us

I love the Lord, because he has heard my voice and my supplications. Because he inclined his ear to me, therefore I will call on him as long as I live. — Psalm 116:1-2, 12-19

Now before the festival of the Passover, Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart from this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end. . . . "I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another." — John 13:1-17, 31b-35

Holy Week is a progression of events that turns the concept of love on its head. Brokenness is shown to be part and parcel of what it is to love deeply. The culminating irony of our Love Story with the Holy is that we are not the ones who need to look for Love because Love comes looking for us, especially in our brokenness and sorrow. Love is here — already and always. This is the source of our ability to love one another.

Easter — Love Wins

At that time, says the LORD, I will be the God of all the families of Israel, and they shall be my people. Thus says the LORD: The people who survived the sword found grace in the wilderness; when Israel sought for rest, the LORD appeared to him from far away. I have loved you with an everlasting love; therefore I have continued my faithfulness to you. — Jeremiah 31:1-6

Jesus said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?" Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away." Jesus said to her, "Mary!" She turned and said to him in Hebrew, "Rabbouni!" (meaning Teacher). — John 20:1-18

In the end (or is it the beginning?), love wins. All things of this world pale in comparison to what resurrection looks like in our lives. New-found meaning, purpose, attention, wholeheartedness, wellbeing, peace: these are the things that matter — the things the Teacher shows us. And no matter how many "wrong places" we've looked for love, the graves give way to the light of a new day as we learn to love as Christ loves us.