

Grace Abounding

The Rev. Dr. Scott Ramsey
Romans 5:12-19; Matthew 4:1-11
Lewinsville Presbyterian Church
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How shall we live in a season and in a time of change and transition? How shall we live as individuals? And more importantly, what might it look like for us to live as the church in a time of transition and change? This is the subject of our Lenten study this year with Carlos Cardoza-Orlandi, and if you missed out on this morning's presentation, you've got 3 more chances to participate.

Our Scripture readings provide us with *the posture* for living in a time of transition and they outline the *core points of temptation* for us in those times. They then invite us to think through *some practices* for living in a time of transition.

First, the posture. Paul writes in Romans 5, "Where sin increased, grace abounded all the more." The point Paul is making here is his claim that, in God's kingdom - in the realm where Jesus Christ is Lord - anywhere sin and fear and violence rear their heads, anywhere they increase, grace may be expected to abound all the more. Grace is always going to be more than a match for sin. God's redemptive love is always more than a match for sin. Grace always plays the longer game, grace always has a larger embrace, grace always heals at a deeper level, grace will always be more than a match for sin.

This is why, throughout the Bible, we are told that we do not need to be afraid. Over and over and over, the angels and our ancestors and Jesus himself teach us that we do not need to be afraid of sin or violence or intimidation. The posture for us in times of challenge and change, is never a posture of fear. The proper posture for living in times of challenge and change is always a posture of hope. Because, according to Paul, grace always abounds, more and more and more.

But grace does not just leave us as passive observers. Grace calls forth a response from us. We don't simply sit there and watch grace abound. We are summoned to respond to grace, to follow and trust and act. Grace does not take the place of our response, but grace always gives us everything that we need to respond to the trials and the temptations and the challenges and the changes of our lives. In Matthew 4, when Jesus is led by the Holy Spirit into the wilderness, he is led into a liminal space, into his own space of challenge and vulnerability and change and testing, where he is tested for 40 days, for a month and a half, by the devil. It was as though Jesus had his own 40-day Lenten experience before he began his active period of ministry in Matthew 5.

And during his time in the wilderness zone of change and temptation, Jesus is tempted in the three core areas of human craving: our craving for security and safety; our craving for approval and esteem; and our craving for control and power. "Take these stones and make them into bread so you won't be vulnerable to hunger," the devil tells Jesus. "Throw yourself off the pinnacle of the temple, so everyone will be impressed." "Just fall down and serve me," the devil says, "and I will give you unlimited power." Safety, esteem, and power are three core temptations that call out to us, especially when it feels like things are shifting and changing. Jesus, during his 40 days, is led into the heart of human craving. In our own times of change and transition, we may expect to be tempted around these same core areas – anxiety about our safety, wanting other people to think highly of us, and wanting to exercise control over how things unfold.

But just as he was *led into* the wilderness by the Spirit, Jesus is also *led in* the wilderness by the Spirit. Grounded by the Spirit, Jesus keeps his heart open to God's leading, and he's able to respond to each one of these temptations with grace. The Spirit gave Jesus – just as the Spirit will give us – everything he needed to see his way through.

One of the important, and in my view, beautiful ways that this graceful leading by the Holy Spirit is happening here at Lewinsville during our own times of change, is as we are examining how to deepen and grow our ministry of welcome as a congregation during these times. Welcome is at the heart of the gospel, as we grow in our capacity to love the world with the love of God. Welcome is also at the heart of this congregation, as we "love and serve God by responding to human need." Several years ago, that was articulated as the WHY statement for this congregation, why we exist.

At the February Session meeting, we received a request from the youth of our church through the Youth Council to be more open and more public about our welcome to LGBTQ persons as a congregation, people who have often felt excluded and unwelcome in churches. The youth told the Session that their experience of Lewinsville was that Lewinsville was *already* a welcoming congregation, that was glad to make space for gay and lesbian persons in the life of the congregation, and they were asking us to be more transparent and public about that aspect of our welcome and our hospitality. The leadership of our young people on this subject is extremely moving and powerful.

My own unfolding and evolving journey of appreciating and embracing the gifts and leadership of LGBTQ persons has been a deepening experience of prayer, study of Scripture, and listening and learning. A major part of my own journey has been the friendships and relationships that I've had with gay and lesbian friends and people in my family, mentors and colleagues, listening to their stories, which are sometimes painful, and learning from them what it means to be committed to Jesus Christ, and what it means to love. Another major part of my own journey has been to be the

grateful recipient of the leadership of LGBTQ persons in the church: pastors, musicians, elders, deacons, youth leaders, counselors, teachers, in every congregation I have served. My own journey, and the life of my family, would literally not be what it is, without their gifts.

Lewinsville has long been a congregation that has welcomed gay and lesbian persons into the life and leadership of this congregation, so the youth were not asking the Session to make some kind of dramatic change, but just to be graciously open about who we already are. As I've thought about that, I think the reason that Lewinsville has been a welcoming congregation for a long time is because Lewinsville has been journeying into the gracious heart of God for a long time before "journey into the heart of God" became a slogan for this year.

As we continue to find our way through these things, if any of you would like to talk more about any of this, any of the pastors would love to get coffee with you, and members of the Session would welcome those conversations as well.

Our world tries very hard to force us into polarized, either-or categories. Lewinsville, at our best, has always known that life is much richer and more complicated than binary categories of right and wrong, black and white, good and bad. Now, there are times when the lines between right and wrong seem quite clear and obvious. But a lot of the time, life is not that clear. And what we know about how the world tries to force people into those kinds of binary, polarized categories – and believe me, this is an area of great growth for me, because my anxious mind really likes those kinds of clear, black and white categories – but in a world that tries to do that, people who do not fit our preferred, tight categories can be outcast and scorned and shunned. Lewinsville, at its best, has known for a long time that life is more complicated than that, and has been able to make space for the parts of us that don't fit in other places.

Recently, I was having coffee with my dear friend Rabbi Amy Schwarzmann from Temple Rodef Shalom down the street, and she was telling me about a sermon she preached on Rosh Hashanah, one of the Jewish high holy days. In that sermon, she was reflecting on this temptation to fall into polarized, binary, either-or thinking, and how harmful that can be for our life together. She was saying that members of the Jewish community, in particular, know from their own painful experience, that an us-them divide can quickly lead to seeing "them" as being different and lesser, which then leads quickly to intolerance and even violence against "them." She talked about how one challenge is that parts of our brains can be almost hard-wired for binary thinking – fight or flight, good or bad, safe or dangerous. But she then invited her congregation to become more open to nondualistic, non-binary thinking. Rabbi Schwarzmann said that "when we fall back on binary thinking too often, we fail to engage with the complexities of our world. We leave people out. We miss a spectrum of ideas. We lose nuance. And

the fertile middle ground becomes invisible.”¹ Life is complex. Sexuality is complex. Love is complex. Suffering is complex. Our life together as a community is complex.

If you’re like me, you may initially find this sort of thinking uncomfortable, in our thirst for clarity. But then, if you’re anything like me, you may realize that we ourselves are also quite complicated people who live on a spectrum. We are a mixture, as Martin Luther taught us back in the 16th century, of saint and sinner, faithful and fearful, conservative in some ways and liberal in other ways. We can find ourselves, in words that I heard this past week, “firmly on several sides of these issues.” We are complicated.

Times of change and transition can be uncomfortable. We may presume that Jesus’ own wilderness time of testing was uncomfortable. But if Jesus’ experience is applicable to our own, the Spirit which led him into his wilderness time is leading us into our wilderness time. And the Spirit never abandons us, but will give us everything we need to see our way through. And we need not be afraid in our times of change and transition, for God’s grace is abounding. To God and to God alone, be all the glory. Amen.

¹ Rabbi Amy Schwarzmann, “Embracing ‘THEY’ and the gift of non-binary thinking,” , Sermon for Rosh Hashanah 5783, September 25, 2022. Available <https://www.templerodefshalom.org/worship/high-holy-days/clergy-sermons/>.