

# Spiritual

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**Genesis 9:8-17 and Mark 1:9-17**

The popular term is “earworm,” a song that gets in your head and won’t get out. I have two at the moment, which seem to be playing every time I turn on the radio, so they are, in turn, playing all the time in my head. One is called “It’s All About the Bass.” It is extremely catchy, and also has a positive word to say about female body image, which is good.

The second is called “Take Me to Church.” When I first heard it I was confused, a popular song about going to church. Not quite. “Church” is not church in this case, but something a little more, shall I say, PG13. You can find the lyrics on your own, but in essence the singer substitutes a particular understanding of church with romance. ““We were born sick,’ you heard them say it,” them, presumably the church that was bent on making its worshippers feel guilty, sinful, unclean.

All I can think of, every time I hear this song, which is quite often, is if that’s the version of church anyone carries around with them, then I’d want to find another church as well. A church that preaches all that’s wrong with humankind predicated by a God whose chief business is judgment and condemnation. Now I know that church exists out there, and is not exclusive to any one denominational label or experience. I cannot really blame anyone who has experienced that to be skeptical about the church; nor can I get particularly worked up over a top 40 song critiquing it. But that is not church I’d be interested in.

I am plenty aware of my shortcomings, and where I need to be changed and transformed. And Lent, in its best sense, offers that invitation. But that vision is predicated on a different understanding of God, whose central mission is redemption and restoration and reconciliation, each of us and all of us, and not condemnation and judgment. When course correction need to happen, it happens in the form of grace and love and hope.

Take me to *that* church, I would say. A church honest about what it is and what it is not, and a church eager to explore who God is and who God is not, a community of seekers seeking an understanding of self and an understanding of the world based on hope, and based fundamentally on a God who, when we seek, is always ready to welcome.

Not only are we in Lent, a 40-day journey that commenced with Ash Wednesday and concludes on Easter morning, but we are in a season of six weeks where six words will be fairly prominent in our life together. The point of the words will *not* be the words themselves. Rather, they will help invite us, in a year of invitation, into a deeper connection with our own journeys with God and make us ever more mindful of God’s journey with us through the life of Jesus.

Secondly, they will be designed, these six words, to invite others, in a year of invitation, to connect with us.

There are plenty of words to describe Third Church, and there are plenty of words to describe the life of faith. There is no magic, particularly, in these six: ***spiritual, thoughtful, inclusive, compassionate, artistic, engaged***; though it did take more than a few meetings to land on them!

What we hope is that these words are common enough, not very church-y, so they help you to understand who we are...plus two more things.

- If a guest walked in this morning, they could understand a bit of who we are with those words.
- Or, if you were standing in line at Wegmans, or had few minutes before a concert at school, or had a coffee break with a co-worker, you could describe this place to them without feeling too in-your-face, too theological.

My experience is that if you are connected with this place, that connection matters. But we don't always have tools to talk about it. We simply want to say "come and see," but even that, in our culture, can feel pushy or uncomfortable. But we can say thoughtful, inclusive, compassionate, artistic, engaged. And maybe even we can say "spiritual," as long as that word doesn't mean all the things it means when we layer the baggage of our experiences, or the worst of cultural portrayals, on what church is.

We know the landscape well. A recent article in the *Harvard Political Review* (Will Long, February 15, 2015) is entitled "The Death of Religion and the Rise of Faith." It tells the story of a U.S representative who took her oath of office with her hand placed not on a Bible, but, for the first time in history, a copy of the Constitution.

We know about the rise of the "nones," that's n-o-n-e, those professing no religious preference or affiliation. We hear about the empty cathedrals of Europe and pundits conjecture that we are next. There is lots of hand-wringing and blame and fear and anxiety. That's a church I wouldn't want to be taken to either.

Fear not, the Harvard writer writes: "America is not a post-religious society, despite what sensationalist headlines may have us believe. Just as religion has waxed and waned throughout history, so it will continue to do into the foreseeable future. The demographics are rapidly shifting, and as the next generation moves away from traditional sources to satisfy their spirituality, religious institutions will inevitably step up to a legacy of innovation that dates back to the nation's founding."

That's helpful, I think, but only so much as it reminds us that what two of the church's tasks are *not* to be: *not* to condemn, or *not* to think solely of all of you, all of us, all those "out there," as market share. Too many conferences advertised are about putting people in seats, rather than telling the story of our faith, rather than connecting with people on their journey of faith.

You have heard about the N-O-N-Es. You have also heard, I bet, about the S-B-N-Rs, the "spiritual but not religious." Those who say they have a faith, believe, even engage in spiritual practices like prayer or meditation, but do so without participation in organized religion. I certainly understand that impulse,

given what we've said already about perceptions of the church, given that most of the headlines you see about religion are bad ones – misconduct, financial scandal, violence. And I do find God in nature, and I can find deep meaning in the *Sunday Times*.

Yet hear what U.C.C. minister Lillian Daniel writes: "Being privately spiritual but not religious just doesn't interest me. There is nothing challenging about having deep thoughts all by oneself. What is interesting is doing this work in community, where other people might call you on stuff, or heaven forbid, disagree with you. Where life with God gets rich and provocative is when you dig deeply into a tradition that you did not invent all for yourself." (*Huffington Post*, September 13, 2011) "If we made a church for all these spiritual-but-not-religious people," Daniel writes, "if we got them all together to talk about their beliefs and their incredibly unique personal religions, they might find out that most of America agrees with them. But they'll never find that out, because getting them all together would be way too much like church. "

And yet we persevere, not to condemn, and not to fill some statistical quota. Daniel concludes: "With the humbling realization that there are some things we simply cannot do for ourselves, communities of human beings have worked together and feuded together and just goofed up together. They come together because Jesus came to live with these same types of people. Thousands of years later, we're still trying to be the body of Christ, and we are human and realistic enough to know we need a savior who is divine." (*Christian Century*, September 1, 2011)

So if religion is about propagating and perpetuating visions of God that are judgmental or irrelevant, then count me out. If religion is about building a community of seekers searching for meaning, connecting to a bigger story of hope, a quest for life meaning, or service, engaged in the spiritual life not to be holier-than-thou but to connect us to the holy, then sign me up. Organized religion for organized religion's sake isn't worth it. But church for this sake might be.

And that word, "spiritual," becomes more than a marketing term or a demographic niche, but a way to describe that journey, that meaning, that impulse to seek a life that connects the human spirit with God's Spirit.

Lent is traditionally known as a season of giving things up, of deprivation as a means of deepening faith. There are good rationales for that, and not so good ones. Faith that is punitive seems unworthy of the living God who redeems us; faith that adds or removes things in order to allow us to focus on that same loving God might be worth consideration.

I have been a vegetarian in Lent for the last five years or so. I do not feel punished by it, or really inconvenienced much anymore. I do like the focused time to think a bit more about things, and every time I make one choice and not another I remember why, which is good.

And what I remember is what we have remembered this morning from two iconic biblical passages...

- The conclusion of the Noah story and the reminder of God's unconditional, unbreakable, unilateral covenant with humankind. If spirituality does not begin there, then it misses the right starting point, that God is faithful to us, always, even when we are not always faithful to God.
- And Jesus' wandering in the wilderness for forty days as the start of his ministry following his baptism.

What we understand about humanity and what we understand about God are captured well here. A wilderness journey, whether on the waves of a flood or in the perils of the desert. A God whose rainbow is merely a sign of something deeper. A Spirit who does so many things: comforts when we need comforted and agitates when we need agitated.

Our task is to RSVP to the invitation into that story. It is inherently spiritual, because it connects our very human spirits with the very Spirit of God, so that we don't have to make things up and we don't ever have to go it alone.

Such spirituality will lead us to other things: thought, inclusion, compassion, art, engagement. But it begins here where it ends, with a God who loves all of creation and who loves us, and who calls us into community to work out what that looks like. That's true if you have been a part of this spiritual *and* religious community for decades, or if you are here for the very first time. Take me to church – the Spirit is waiting. Amen.