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The First Sunday in Lent

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St. Anne's in-the-Fields Episcopal Church

“Yes to Life”



I recently read a remarkable memoir called *A Shepherd's Life* wherein James Rebanks recounts his life tending to sheep and working on his farm in England's Lake District. Rebanks, who comes from a long line of farmers, is a wonderful storyteller. As one who hated formal schooling, he improbably ended up doing a degree at Oxford. Although he left secondary school as soon as it was permissible, he discovered he loved to read. Every night after a hard day of working on his grandfather's and father's farm, he read. Taking a continuing education course, he was encouraged to pursue the tests necessary for him to go to a university.

And having gone to Oxford, Rebanks could have pursued a very different vocation and forsaken the life of a shepherd. But he chose to return to the farm. This wasn't an easy decision to come by. For in school you are surrounded by people who are (he writes) "obsessed with going somewhere" and "doing something" with your life. "The implication is an idea I have come to hate, that staying local and doing physical work doesn't count for much."

In the last paragraphs of *The Shepherd's Life*, Rebanks, now a good deal older, recounts the story of what was, for him, a moment of crucial realization. It is springtime, and he is returning his flock to the hills. These sheep are bred to fend for themselves in rocky terrain. He enjoys watching the sheep find their way in the rough fields; they are evidently happy to be "home." Rebanks then imitates his flock's sense that all is as it should be by lying down in the grass to drink the sweet and pure water from the nearby stream. He rolls on his back to watch the clouds racing by. His well-trained sheepdogs, Floss and Tan, who have never seen him so relaxed, come and lay next to him. He breathes in the cool mountain air; he listens to the ewes calling to the lambs to follow them through the rocky crags, and he thinks, "This is my life. I want for no other."

What an astonishing statement! A statement that is pretty rare these days, if you ask me, not to mention pretty un-American. By that I don't mean the obvious point that Rebanks is a Brit. I mean that there is so much in our late

consumer capitalist culture invested in us not being able to make that statement.

When we think of sin and temptation, we often aren't really thinking about Sin as the Bible thinks of it. I don't know about you, but I often think about sin as deviousness or being naughty. I told myself I was only going to have half a pint of ice cream, which I did last night. I did only have half a pint – twice. The sin of gluttony. Or we think about anger. For whatever reason, the horn on our car isn't working, and while I can't say I'm big on laying on the horn, I've hated not having it. I feel like I don't have a voice, like anyone can just cut me off without me being able to announce my annoyance and anger. Naturally enough, we think about sin as misdeeds, as mistakes, or emotions. But I think we can say more than this.

At its root, sin is our desire to be something more than what we are, our desire to put ourselves in the place of God. I have a friend who says he discovered a long-lost translation of Psalm 46, you know, the famous Psalm that says: "Be still and know that I am God." My friend says in his translation the Psalmist writes, "Be still and know that I am God...and you are not." When Adam and Eve ate of the tree of good and evil in the garden, it wasn't just that they broke some frivolous legality; it was that their lives got out of sync with God's life, they saw themselves, rather than God, at the center of things. They fell for the fairytale that all of us hear over and over today, that we are self-reliant, self-constructed, self-made, and above all, self-sufficient. And so, Adam and Eve came to be at odds with Reality. Later tradition refers to this episode in the Bible as the Fall; the primal experience of moving out of conscious contact with God. The Fall isn't just a fall from God, however, it's a fall from ourselves, a fall from relationship with our own lives.

There was a great article in the last *New Yorker* on the prevalence of the Imposter Syndrome, that all but ubiquitous feeling of being found out as a phony, as a fraud. The Imposter Syndrome, a phrase coined in the late 70s,

describes the gap people feel between who they really are, and how they feel others experience them, how they seem to the world. If people only knew who I really was, then I wouldn't have their respect, or I'd be out of a job, or God wouldn't love me. It's the desire to belong in a given group, while being barraged by the voice of shame that tells you wouldn't fit in if they knew you. Imposter Syndrome does affect more driven, more gifted individuals. I have a friend who graduated from MIT with his Ph.D. in nuclear physics in under three years, and he said, "Everyday I just couldn't help but feeling like everyone there was smarter, more read, more put together than me."

While the term was coined in the 70s, it's as old as Adam and Eve. They dress themselves up to present themselves before God that they might not be seen as naked. It would have been a whole lot easier for them just to say, "You know God, we made a mistake. Can we run it back?" Instead, they hide from God, and from themselves. The irony of the Imposter Syndrome is that it affects everyone. No one is immune. We're all exhausted and tired of trying to appear good; we're all a little burned out with the project, and maybe more than a touch resentful that we can't seem to lay off it. What would it mean if we just stopped pretending, if church became a recovery meeting of sorts, Imposters Anonymous ("Hi, I'm Bill; I'm an imposter." "Hi Bill, welcome!") the community that challenged one another into Rebanks's simple but subversive claim, "This is me. This is my life. I want no other"?

What would change if we were able to embrace our lives? To love our lives in their totality. To say Yes to our lives. Just as they are. Just as we are.

First, we would come to know God in a more intimate way. We would discover that God isn't off in the clouds somewhere ruling the universe. God isn't some meta-being that sits around kicking it with the seraphim and cherubim and dead people. God is the intimate and pulsing presence in all things. God is Life. God is the deepest root of life. The Spring that flows underneath the earth and soil of experience.

To know and love God is to love and accept myself, and my life just as it is. Now that might sound like I'm flirting with a cheap gospel of self-help; a glib sort of positivity. I'm not saying that we just approve of every last part of ourselves. I'm saying we sit down in the mornings and we note how we are feeling, what's going on inside us. We look at the tasks ahead for the day. We feel our anticipation, our dread, our apathy, our weariness – we notice it all. Our desires and our fears. And we say Yes to it all. For it is our life. And at the root of this Life is God. In affirming our lives, in loving our lives, we love God.

Second, we would come to love others with a more adult and compassionate love. When we are able to say yes to our own lives, we stop desiring or envying the lives of others. We stop wanting another's life. This is where temptation really hits us. You know there is a preacher in the UK I've come to adore. I read and listen to his sermons every week, and his sermons all have this organized, structured quality to them, while at the same time being intellectually rigorous, pastorally sensitive, and theologically astute. Because I like this preacher so much, whenever it's my turn to sit down with a passage there is a little voice in my head that says, "How would Br. Kenneth take this passage?" I'm sometimes asked how long it takes me to write a sermon. The answer is about 10 hours. It usually takes me about 9 of those hours to stop pretending to be Br. Kenneth. But it happens every week that some whisper of a Presence invites me to return to myself, and say, "Let him be him, you be you. What might God want to say through you this week?" We must choose to be ourselves, which means letting other people be themselves. Others are not there for our envy, rivalry, lust, and control. They have their own struggles. To love another person is to help them say yes to their life as you do the same to yours.

Third, we would come to know a profound humility and deep wellspring of joy. By saying yes to our lives, we acknowledge that so much that unfolds is not up for negotiation; we are situated in worlds we never chose.

Americans love to talk about free will, which no sane person can deny, but lets not forget how much of who we are is conditioned, determined by things we never chose. We didn't choose our parents, our names, our height, our race, our childhood love of outer space. We didn't choose to be brought to tears by a piece of music, nor to be soothed by our mother's voice. We never chose to be made alive by the grace our spouses show us. Our lives aren't self-created; we live and move and breathe amidst mysteries and wonders too awesome for our feeble choice. For Christians, life isn't there to be self-created, its there to be blessed – to bless what there is for being, wrote Auden. By saying Yes to life, we bless all that we cannot control, and in so doing, we take our place in the family of a creation that was here before us and will outlast us. We say a humble Yes to the beauty of belonging in it all. And there is joy, huge joy that is unleashed upon offering our lives this blessing.

We realize that we small and fragile creatures, we imposters, we broken and frail beings are alive with the very life and energy of God. The same love that moves the sun and other stars is the love that keeps our heart beatings, our spirits searching, and our imaginations dreaming. When we say Yes to our Lives, we say yes to the Infinite Joy that created life, that holds life in being. This isn't an abstract principle. I'm talking about a love and a joy that became incarnate so that it could embrace our lives. A love that wanted to feel the wisps of grass beneath his feet. To breathe in the scent of saltwater air. To be moved by the sound of a crackling fire. A love that longed to experience our tears on his cheek; or that longed to know the enveloping warmth of an embrace. Not just the sunnier dimensions of existence, either. This God wanted to feel the pain of rejection; the pang of grief and loss; the absence of longing; he wanted to stand in the long shadow cast by betrayal; he wanted to survive a chilly night of broken trust.

God came to wear the flesh of our lives, to live and die and suffer and rise as one of us, to show us that we really can say Yes to it all. We don't have to play God anymore. We

receive and bless the life we've been given and live from the fullness of this blessing.

I wonder what it might look like for you this Lent to look at the life you've been given - your joys, your gifts, your sins, your mistakes, your weariness, your loneliness, your uncertainties, your unhewn edges - to feel the very real temptation to run, to acknowledge the innate capacity to look away, and then to feel a deeper and more intimate Energy within you, there to help you say Yes to it all.