

Ash Wednesday
March 6, 2019
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Trinity Episcopal Church, Bend

Joel 2:1-2, 12-17
Psalm 103:8-14
2 Corinthians 5:20b–6:10
Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

In a few moments, I will invite you “to the observance of a holy Lent.”

But first, I will recite words that tell us something of the history of this holy season of Lent, of how it has been a season of penitence and fasting nearly from the earliest days of Christianity.

I will speak of converts being prepared for baptism. I will not speak of all that would have been involved in that preparation, but you’ll understand, I hope, that the process would have involved repenting from an old life in order to embrace a new life in Christ.

I will talk about “those who, because of notorious sins,” were cut off from the Christian community, and how they were restored to fellowship with the Church. I will talk of their need for both repentance and forgiveness.

And then I will tell you that this is why we all observe Lent together in the same way. The words insist that there is an edifying connection between those old pagans and the rest of us, between the notorious sinners and those of us who have kept the faith. Their experiences are supposed to put us in mind of something critical: “the message of pardon and absolution set forth in the Gospel of our Savior, and of the need which all Christians continually have to renew their repentance and faith.”

The logic will be compelling for some, I suspect. For others, however, the logic will be suspect.

As our liturgy this evening unfolds, we’ll be pulling out a lot of hefty, heavy words. Words like penitence and fasting. Reconciliation ... and forgiveness. Pardon ... and absolution. Repentance and faith. Self-examination. Prayer. Fasting. Self-denial.

For some folks, the words describe an urgent spiritual need to be welcomed – or welcomed back – into the Christian life and community. For some folks, words and acts of contrition – and the promise of absolution that follows – are life-giving and spirit-quenching.

But for others, the emphasis on our need for repentance feels heavy and suffocating. It feels like being told they don’t measure up, that they’ll have to work ever harder to try to prove their worth to a God who will never be satisfied. For these others, there’s little “good news” here.

I want to suggest a way forward. I want to suggest that our theme this night – and for all of Lent to come – is not merely a call to feel bad about ourselves and/or our moral failings. This is not a season for wallowing in our shame and unworthiness. That’s what we are to repent of.

But as soon as I say that, I need to cautiously ask us to carefully consider what it means to repent. In the New Testament, the word typically is “metanoia” – and it suggests quite a bit more than feeling bad about the bad things we’ve done; it means a transformed mind. A new heart. A new way of seeing God and the world ... and how we fit in.

From the beginning of his ministry, Jesus called for those who would hear him to “repent.” But by and large, it wasn’t a guilt trip or a put-down. It was generally an invitation to see the world – and ourselves – new and fresh.

“Repent,” Jesus says, and then (at least as Mark tells it) he adds, “and believe in the good news” (Mark 1:15). And the “good news” is always news of God’s love for us and for all.

In our gospel here this evening, I think Jesus echoes the point. He calls on his followers not to be like the hypocrites, not to be like those who are concerned with whether they’re putting on a show that proves their worth to others. As if that was ever the point of life.

Mind you, Jesus assumes his followers will do what religious folk do – they’ll give alms and they’ll pray and they’ll fast – but Jesus repeatedly calls on his followers to do so not to prove anything, but rather to do so “in secret.”

And every time Jesus speaks of the things we do “in secret,” he goes on to speak of the God “who is in secret,” the God “who sees in secret.”

It’s his way of insisting, I think, that God sees us as we truly are, not merely as we try to pretend we are. And more to the point, it’s his way of trying to get us to see that in our deepest selves all is not darkness, at least not so far as God is concerned, but only light.

So notice that Jesus never even hints at the idea that we should be afraid of what God sees when God sees us as we truly are. Again and again, Jesus speaks of encountering the one “who sees in secret” as being one and the same as the one who “will reward you.”

There is no suggestion that God is somehow looking deep within to find something deeply wrong inside, something that God will use to sort us out in the end. There is only the confidence we will be well-served, rewarded even, if we make room for the God already within us ... if we take the time and make the effort to see how our life is wrapped up and in all that is sacred, to come to understand that we are more than what others can see by looking at us.

And that is the hope that we share with every other person on the planet – namely that the God who created us out of love will always hold us in love. That’s good news for the every lost heathen. That’s good news for every notorious sinner. That’s good news for you and me ... as well as for every person we’ll ever meet – or see looking back at us in the mirror.

In a precious few moments, I will invite you “to the observance of a holy Lent.”

And then ashes will be imposed. And we'll kneel together (as we are able) to recite an ancient penitential psalm together and we'll confess our sins as part of a litany of penitence. But here, too, I want to make the point that we only say these prayers of confession and penitence because they're immediately followed by the promise of absolution ... and God's love.

And so when I invite you "to the observance of a holy Lent," I hope you'll sift through all the hefty, heavy language and discover where the good news is for you in all that. If Lent gets us no further than sinking into a litany of our failings and shortcomings, our Lenten observances have failed us. On the other hand, if our Lenten observances can help us live new lives steeped in the love of God and expressed in the love of neighbor and self, then Lent can open up a resurrected Easter life.

If you come forward this night with great solemnity to be signed with ashes on your forehead, I hope you come forward once more on Easter Eve to be splashed with baptismal waters and anointed with holy oil. For that is where this holy season of Lent is headed. That is where we are all headed ... the sinners with the saints, both the heathen and the righteous. We all lay claim to nothing more nor less than the good news of God's love for all whom God has made.

Here on Ash Wednesday, I offer the solemn reminder that we are all more alike than different – we are all of us loved by the God who formed us of the dust:

Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.

But I only do so tonight in order to be able to offer the solemn counterpart on Easter:

Remember that you are God's beloved, and to Love you will return.

And if all that we do this night – and through all the days of this season ahead – can hang on to that reminder, then we will indeed have observed a holy Lent.