

Wednesday, March 6, 2019

Ash Wednesday

Matthew 6.1-6, 16-21

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Today we make an abrupt shift in our liturgical focus, which in turn is reflective of the focus of our spiritual lives. We shift from the season of Epiphany, with its focus on the nature of God and Jesus and on the many and varied ways in which God is manifest in and through Jesus, to the season of Lent, with its focus on our own mortal nature, using the key images of sin and death. To be sure, we tend to have a love-hate relationship with the season of Lent and its less-than-positive imagery. Some people hate Lent because, compared to the seasons both before and after, it seems so dark and dreary. And some people really love Lent, viewing it as a time of intentional spiritual exploration in preparation for the glories of Easter.

When I first became an Episcopalian, I was one of those who hated Lent. I grew up in a tradition that did not particularly focus on Lent. We did, but it was more of an intensified version, with the primary focus being on Holy Week and the Passion. Focusing on what Jesus endured prior to Easter. But very little emphasis on our own part in the spiritual drama that unfolds during Lent, intensifies during Holy Week, and culminates in Easter. But as I grew in my faith within the Episcopal Church, I came to appreciate and even cherish the forty-day period of Lent, with its emphasis on my own part in the drama that is Holy Week and Easter.

And regardless of where you are in your own views of Lent—whether you embrace the opportunity to continue to grow in faith through Lenten disciplines, or whether you dread Lent and view it as a somewhat necessary low period to be endured so that we can get to the glory of Easter—I think Ash Wednesday is a unique opportunity to enter into this season with new eyes, with a fresh perspective. To be open to the unique lessons that this season affords. To be open to seeing our part in the drama that unfolds over the next six and a half weeks. To be open to being transformed by it.

How does this particular day, Ash Wednesday, set the stage for what is to follow? How can it set the stage for a time that, while focused on sinfulness and death, can become a time of renewal and new life? As one commentator notes, “What makes this day different, of course, are the ashes, those gritty signs that proclaim our moral frailty and our frail mortality” (*Sundays & Seasons Preaching: Year C 2019*, Ash Wednesday). This is the starting point for this day and for this season. But we do not have to remain in the ash heap, pouring ashes over our heads and dwelling on the fact that we are going to die one day. Even as we receive those gritty ashes on our foreheads as a reminder of our “moral frailty and our frail mortality,” we have the opportunity to view those ashes not as a permanent brand upon our bodies and our souls, but as a reminder of where we have been and a sign of the hope and promise of where we are going on this spiritual journey.

To do that, we need to face the reality of what Lent signifies, but at the same time, not dwell there. At least not permanently. We need to look beyond to what it points to—what is on the other side. To view this as a journey that, yes, entails a period of darkness, but like the night is

time for quiet contemplation that will soon give way to the rising sun and to the dawn of a new day. Not a time to be dreaded, but a time to be cherished. A time, like night, that is one of renewal. A time to prepare us for what comes beyond the dawn.

The season of Lent is a time in which the elements of our worship experiences—the readings, the music, the stripped down accoutrements—remind us of our inherently sinful nature, of our own deaths, and particularly of Jesus’ Passion and death. But it is also a time in which these same elements point to a greater reality. Pointing to the fact that sin and death do not have the final word. Pointing to the ultimate reality of forgiveness, to resurrection and new life. As Guy Erwin, Bishop of the Southwest California Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, has aptly noted, “Our faith is death-defying: it takes death seriously, and faces it unflinchingly” (*Sundays & Seasons Preaching: Year C 2019*, Ash Wednesday). And it is in the Lenten season when we make that transition where we see death for what it is, where we see sin for what it is. Not things that define us, but things that transform us. That this is a time that prepares us for transformation. For the time when we share in Christ’s death during Holy Week. For the time when we share in Christ’s resurrection at Easter.

Jesus himself, in our Gospel reading for this day, provides a roadmap for the journey toward transformation. The portion of Matthew’s Gospel that we heard today is smack-dab in the middle of Sermon on the Mount. This is an extended sermon in which Jesus seeks to convey the radical life changes that his followers are to engage in if they are to be fully a part the coming kingdom of heaven. In the portion that we heard today, Jesus commends almsgiving, prayer, and fasting as signs of our discipleship. Acts of spiritual devotion that must not be done merely for show, but rather as authentic expressions of our life in Christ. This Gospel reading is the source of the three disciplines that have come to epitomize Lent: to increase one’s giving to the poor, to increase one’s attention to prayer, and to decrease one’s focus on the self. Taken together, these disciplines are intended to be a way to open oneself to God and to one’s neighbor.

Rather than being meant as penitential disciplines—as onerous tasks that we undertake as a means of repenting for our sinfulness—these three disciplines are intended to be the means by which transformation occurs. They are intended to provide a path that leads us through the darkness of “our moral frailty and our frail mortality” into the light of forgiveness and salvation, into the light of new and eternal life.

Rather than thinking of the three Lenten disciplines in their traditional way, perhaps it is helpful to think of them in terms of what is meant to be accomplished through each. That each discipline is meant to focus on a particular aspect of relationship and of new life.

Prayer is perhaps the easiest of the Lenten disciplines to see in terms of relationship and new life. Prayer is the act of intentionally communicating with God. We know that good, solid, consistent communications is the key to any relationship. Our relationship with God is no different. Relationship with God means continually being in communications. Both in terms of sharing our most intimate thoughts, needs, and desires with God, and by allowing times of silence to allow God to communicate his love and desires to us. Through our discipline of prayer, we seek to intentionally be in relationship with the one who created us and who

nurtures and sustains us. And through that relationship, to enter into new life with him, both in this world, and in the age to come.

Almsgiving is the act of giving out of our abundance to benefit those who are not as fortunate, to those who lack the things that we take for granted. The giving of money or food or clothing or any other basic necessities to those who so often go without. What is meant to be achieved through almsgiving is an awareness of the basic rights and the dignity of the other. To be willing to share what we have out of solidarity with those whom we recognize to be our brothers and sisters in Christ. Those who are just as beloved of God as we view ourselves. To not view them as other but to seek to be in relationship with them precisely because they are created in the image and likeness of God, just as we are. To seek to be in relationship with others and to enter into new life with them.

Which leaves fasting. This Lenten discipline is maybe the most difficult to see in terms of relationship and new life. But it is, in fact, perhaps the most crucial, as it sets the foundation for relationship and new life with God and with others. Fasting is the act of abstaining from certain things, be they food, drink, or certain activities. What is meant to be achieved through fasting is not so much self-deprivation, as working on relationship with self. To be mindful and intentional about what activities we engage in and why we engage in them. The real focus of fasting is to provide a means of intentionally working on our relationship with who we are created to be—beloved of God. To work on our relationship with our true and authentic self so that we can be more available and present to being in relationship with God and with others. To seek to eliminate those things that may be sources of obsession, sources of distraction, that can and often do get in the way of our relationship with God and with others. To allow ourselves to enter into new life with our truest and deepest self so that we can be open to truer and deeper relationship with God and with others.

By engaging in these three Lenten disciplines, we open ourselves to deeper and truer relationship with God and with our neighbors. We open ourselves to that truer and deeper relationship and new life that was exemplified by Jesus Christ as he made his final journey to Jerusalem, as he endured his Passion, as he went to the cross, and ultimately, as he was resurrected to new life, securing for us deeper relationship and new life with him and with God. Through these Lenten disciplines, we place ourselves on that journey with him, opening ourselves to the glories that await on the other side of the resurrection.

This is a journey that we begin today with the sign of ashes placed upon our foreheads. A reminder of “our moral frailty and our frail mortality.” But this is not the end. For it is in the recognition of this fact that we are empowered to turn around and seek a new way. A better way. To journey with our Lord into deeper relationship and new life. For, as one commentator noted, “The sign of ashes suggests our human mortality and frailty. What seems like an ending is really an invitation to make each day a new beginning” (*Sundays & Seasons Preaching: Year C 2019, Ash Wednesday*).