

Genesis 9: 8-17; Psalm 25: 1-9; 1 Peter 3: 18-22; Mark 1: 9-15

Lent remains a puzzling time for me, and I suspect, for you as well. Does it still really have a meaningful place in our 21st century world? Does the liturgical season of Lent with its call to a season of penitence and fasting make any sense to those of us who have more than enough of tangible things? For those of us who have never experienced true hunger, fasting can seem more like form over substance – something we do because we’re “supposed to” rather than as something that can deeply change our outlook and understanding of others who live without sufficient food most days.

Most of us are pretty insulated from the struggles of life. Basically we have more than enough. Maybe not always everything we want but those of us gathered here have clothing, shelter and food – our basic needs are met and for many of us those needs are met in abundance. And, most of us are too busy with daily life to spend time in quiet and reflection, or so we tell ourselves.

So physically we’re basically fine. But spiritually? Maybe not so much. Maybe that loneliness we spoke about in Adult Ed two weeks ago hits home and we don’t know what to do about why we feel so disconnected from ourselves and our neighbors. Or why we might think about suicide when we’re at our wits end because our life has been turned upside down, as is the case for a friend of mine. My heart breaks at the loneliness, the pain and despair, as we talked about how she was feeling. Where is God, she asked? I’ve been a faithful Christian all my life. I feel so abandoned now, she said. Heartbreaking. There are no easy answers.

Lent, more than other liturgical season offers us a chance, if we will take it, to stop. To get off the regular merry-go-round of our daily lives, even if it is just for a few minutes each day, to ponder what is really important. What can help us through those really dark times. What can give us the strength to pick up and go on when all is darkness around us.

In Percy Dearmer’s Hymn we read:

Now quit your care and anxious fear and worry;
 For schemes are vain and fretting brings no gain.
 Lent calls to prayer, to trust and dedication;
 God brings new beauty nigh;
 Reply, reply, reply with love to love most high;
 Reply, reply, reply with love to love most high.¹

Lent begins with Ash Wednesday. It is a paradoxical day. Our Gospel on that day speaks of retreating to our room in silence and being alone to pray and not outwardly exhibiting pious behavior. We’re told that those who outwardly profess their adherence to religious norms have already received their reward while those who pray to God in secret, those who give alms in secret, and those who fast without outward notice are the ones that God seeks. And yet, we impose ashes on our foreheads in an outward and visible sign of our faith. How many of us surreptitiously wipe those ashes away before we enter the grocery store so that other shoppers won’t know that we have been to services? We’re embarrassed, perhaps, that in this largely secular world, we still go to church. We may even have been asked about that smudge on our forehead if we’re brave enough to leave the ashes for others to see. It’s a quandary about inner faith and practice and outward signs of our faith.

¹ Hymnal 1982, #145

Ashes and sackcloth are signs of mourning that come from early Biblical times. They reflect our sorrow at loss and this carries through to today as we remember Jesus's time in the wilderness and the time leading up to his crucifixion. Ashes are a sign, perhaps, of our solidarity with Jesus and with a life that is not always easy or comfortable. Dearmer continues his hymn with:

To bow the head in sackcloth and ashes, or rend the soul,
such grief is not Lent's goal;
But to be led to where God's glory flashes, his beauty to come near.
Make clear, make clear, make clear where truth and light appear;
Make clear, make clear, make clear where truth and light appear.

Perhaps Dearmer had a clearer vision for what Lent could and should be. A time to discern where God's glory can be revealed in new ways in order that the truth of Jesus Christ, the light of the world, appears in our lives. Just as we talked about last week when considering the Transfiguration and mountaintop experiences. We are not supposed to stay on the mountaintop. Neither are we to stay in the shadows of the valley of death. We are to walk the road and see the road made straight as we walk in the light of our faith, to love God and to love neighbor as ourselves. We are, through our life and thus our witness, to make clear where truth and light appear.

Our call from the prophet Micah is that:

He has told you, O mortal, what is good;
and what does the LORD require of you
but to do justice, and to love kindness,
and to walk humbly with your God? (Micah 6:9, NRSV)

Perhaps Lent is now a time to remember and to re-center ourselves in our faith. To encourage and build up our core so that when we experience times of struggle and doubt we can fall back upon the basics of our faith and rebuild our lives focused on God once again.

To do so means, in part, that we remember what it is that God has called us to be and to do.

For righteous and peace will show their faces to those who feed the hungry in their need,
And wrongs redress, who build the old waste places,
And in the darkness shine.
Divine, divine, divine it is when all combine!
Divine, divine, divine it is when all combine!

One of the reasons Lent has become a more satisfying season for me is our ecumenical efforts. This is the season when we intentionally gather with other churches for a soup supper and then a program and discussion. When, in the words of Dearmer, all combine. Whatever doctrinal or other differences keep us from being one church the rest of the year fall away as we gather in fellowship and for learning. When we share knowledge and ask questions and listen respectfully to others. This is a time when we can feel connected to others and to God in the relationships we form.

And yet, the shooting in Florida this week shows us quite clearly that all is not well in our world. What does Lent have to do with another tragic episode when a gunman felt empowered – felt it necessary - to kill. I certainly don't have answers. I wonder, though, if saying that the gunman was mentally ill is a cop-out. It's true that the research is not 100% consistent on whether the mass killers in the last decades were, in fact, actually mentally ill. In fact, many had no diagnosis of any kind of mental illness. Thus, my concern that saying a mass killer is automatically someone who is mentally ill is a bit of a cop-out. In fact, if we are going to go down that road, I suggest that all of us are mentally ill at some point in our life. Whether our mental illness causes us to act out in violent ways is a different discussion, I suggest. This discussion and our actions to stop gun violence is far from over. There may yet be things develop that each of us can and needs to do.

Pray, in this season of Lent, for clarity around the issues facing our society that trouble you most, whatever that issue is. Prayer and discern where God is calling you to act. Take time to reflect upon your daily life and your daily contacts. Are there ways in which you can support someone who is struggling? Are you able to listen to someone's despair and offer a prayer for light and a new way to a fulfilling life? Pray for courage to be a neighbor. Pray to see Jesus Christ in every person with whom you come into contact. Pray for healing. And reply, reply, reply with love to love most high. **Amen.**