

Ash Wednesday
March 1, 2017
The Rev. Denise Trogdon

Attending your own Funeral

Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return. Catchy phrase isn't it? It is one that puts us in the mood for observing a holy Lent. We can begin thinking of all the ways to sacrifice and be penitent through these next forty days. After all there isn't an alleluia in sight. Most of us anticipate this season as a time of self-reflection, self-control, and self-denial. Some may believe that the Lenten journey is about fighting back temptations and remembering our wretchedness. When we patiently and reverently walk through the forty days, we mirror Christ's temptation in the wilderness. But what is the motivation of our self-denial? Is Lent about what we give up or what we give back?

This is the subject of our Old Testament reading today from Isaiah. The text for today comes from the third part of Isaiah written about one hundred years after the Israelites returned from exile in Babylon. The excitement of the homecoming had worn off. The promises of a new kingdom, not yet realized contributed to a sense of discouragement among the people. The hard work of rebuilding Jerusalem left some feeling disillusioned and without hope for the future.

The prophet Isaiah came to challenge the Israelites to remember the faithfulness of their God, to recall how God provided for them in the wilderness and to inspire devotion that would bear witness in their actions. Isaiah confronted their empty worship practices of fasting and sacrifice that did not culminate in care for the world and one another. He questioned the motivation of their rituals. Were their practices meant to manipulate God's favor? He said, "Why do we fast, but you do not see? Why humble ourselves, but you do not notice? Look, you serve your own interest on your fast day and oppress all your workers." Isaiah asked what it meant to be a people of God if hearts were hardened to the world around them. His words shake us to the core.

We, too, are at risk for becoming self-centered in this reflective season. We can get caught up in ritual and spiritual disciplines without connecting our contrite hearts to an attitude of compassion and service. In a time where the threat of scarcity breeds fear and self-protection, we may forget about God's abundant provision for us. Contrition and repentance are not meant to engender shame. Humility grounds us in our collective need for God and one another. Remember that you are created, and to creation you will return.

Barbra Brown Taylor describes Ash Wednesday as a day that Christians attend their own funeral. She says the liturgy reminds us of our own demise or at the very least our finite humanity. Receiving ashes sets a tone of penitence, but the liturgy would be incomplete without the offer of forgiveness and the restorative Eucharistic feast.

Isaiah's words reframe fasting and worship as our grateful response to a present and faithful God, who equips us to do God's work. "Is not the fast that I choose; to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked to cover them and not to hide yourself from your own kin?" For those whose lives were measured by pious rituals and not compassion, these words were challenging. The measure of our spiritual maturity is not how often we pray, read the Bible or go to church. It is about the attitude of our hearts and whether God's Spirit flows within us to reach a world that is discouraged.

Matthew tells us in our gospel today, "for where your treasure is, there your heart will be also." Are we not stewards of the grace, forgiveness and love that have been given to us? We cannot treasure our relationship with God and ignore creation or one another. So this time of

contemplation and prayer is not to ruminate on our wretchedness but to reflect upon how our faith may be lived out.

Let us take this Lenten time to reflect upon how God has provided for us faithfully throughout history and in our own time. The parched places of our lives can remind us of the wilderness in which our ancestors once wandered and from where they were delivered. The hunger and suffering we may experience connects us to God's manna in the desert and to our brothers and sisters who experience hunger each day. Even our self-imposed sacrifice can sensitize us to our humanity and help us remember how Jesus always stood in solidarity with the suffering.

Isaiah brings us good news for our Lenten journey, to encourage us to live our righteousness in the care of others. His words remind us of God's promises. "The Lord will guide you continually, and satisfy your needs in parched places, and make your bones strong; and you shall be like a watered garden, like a spring of water, whose waters never fail." As you receive ashes today think of it not so much as a mark of penitence, but as a reminder of our common humanity and our charge to care for one another, and all that God has abundantly given us. Remember that you are created and to creation you will return. Amen