

Ash Wednesday Year A; 26 February 2020

St. James' Episcopal Church, Clinton NY

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Jesus holds up the practice of the faithful believer:
to give alms, to pray, to fast.
The sign of the cross, the dark mark made by ashes,
is the very same sign that was made in oil
at the time of our baptism.
May each of us keep a Holy Lent,
striving to fulfil our baptismal covenant:

Isaiah 58:1-12

2 Corinthians 5:20b-6:10

Matthew 6:1-6,16-21

Psalm 103

Yesterday was Shrove Tuesday, Mardi Gras—Fat Tuesday—*Carne-vale*. It was a day for celebration and feasting, a time to eat as much rich food as possible: pancakes full of eggs, milk, dripping with butter and honey, or if blessed to live in upstate New York, pancakes sweeten with maple syrup. Maybe there were sausages to accompany the pancakes: meat, dairy, fat, sugar...all the things that represent richness: things that remind us that we are body creatures.

Now, after the festivities of last night's Pancake Supper, we pivot into the season of Lent.

Today is Ash Wednesday. We are reminded that we are body creatures in a different way. In the tradition of liturgical churches, soon we will have ashes smeared on our foreheads. We will feel the hard grittiness across our foreheads. We will hear the words "Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return."¹

But if Ash Wednesday is when we come to church, to receive ashes on our forehead, and then go out of these doors, dark marks prominent on our foreheads, how do we make sense of the Gospel reading?²

Jesus says,

"Beware of practicing your piety before others ...
when(ever) you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you...
when(ever) you pray...(don't) stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners...
when(ever) you fast, do not look dismal... to show others (but instead) put oil on your head
and wash your face, so that your fasting may be seen not by others but (only) by G-d"³

¹ Book of Common Prayer, 1979, page 265.

² Matthew 6:1-6,16-21

³ This homily writer uses G-d for the written name.

When, not if but WHEN: “When you give alms...when you pray...when you fast.”

It seems that Jesus holds up the practice of the faithful believer; to give alms, to pray, to fast. So maybe this Gospel reading is not that we should set aside these practices, but that we understand why we are called to do these things.

What do you hear, when someone says “alms giving ? Giving money to the poor? Christian charity? The well intentioned and maybe even spontaneous act of good will: what you do when you pick up some canned items to donate to Country Pantry when you go grocery shopping; the spare change you give to a soup kitchen or to help fund hot lunches for school children. Now, understand, these are all good things. . But in the Hebrew the word for alms- giving, (צדקה), also means justice.

In giving: NO-not giving, in SHARING with other, we acknowledge our relationship with our fellow human beings. (In צדקה), we are remind that we are all in it together in this common life, in relationship with each other.

And prayer? Prayer are the words we say during our worship services: this Ash Wednesday service is an entire series of prayers, interspersed with words from the Holy Scripture. Prayer is the words of thanksgiving we say before a meal: “Thank you G-d for this food we eat...”⁴ Prayer is the words we say before we go to bed: “Now I lay me down to sleep...”⁵ But as the Apostle Paul reminds us, we are to pray unceasingly.⁶ Prayer, being in conversation with G-d, listening to G-d as G-d hears us as we pray. In the life shaped by prayer, prayer is not only a habit of the mouth, but a service of the heart. Prayer becomes a way of being one with G-d and all of G-d’s creation.

And fasting? We think of fasting as giving up food, or choosing to abstain from certain foods. Some of us give up sweets for Lent, or coffee, or meat...or eating more lightly, or giving up a meal, or maybe even not eat anything at all for a day. Or maybe giving up something else. When we fast, it makes a mark upon us because we are body creatures. In giving up something, we are remind of how connected we are to those around us. We are body people, living in the midst of other body people... and, in the end, we are all dust.

Alms-giving, prayer, fasting: three things that help remind us of our connectedness, to each other, and to G-d. Three disciplines that can help us return to a right relationship with our fellow living beings, and with G-d

⁴ The start of a commonly use pray before eating; the Grace. One version is:

Thank you for the food we eat,
Thank you for the friends we meet.
Thank you for the birds that sing,
Thank you, God, for everything.

⁵ The start of a a classic children's bedtime prayer from the 18th century. One version is:

Now I lay me down to sleep
I pray the Lord my soul to keep;
His Love to guard me through the night,
And wake me in the morning's light.

from Debbie Trafton O'Neal; Nancy Munger. (1994), **Now I Lay Me Down to Sleep: Action Prayers, Poems, and Songs for Bedtime**, Augsburg Books, p. 6.

⁶ 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18 “Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of G-d in Christ Jesus for you.”



The Season of Lent has traditionally been the time of deep soul searching, of reflection, and of repentance. Ash Wednesday, positioned as it is at the start of Lent, is the reminder, the pivot point, when we turn from our old ways towards the way G-d means for us to be, where there is justice, where there is listening, and where there is connectedness with our neighbors, not just those within our gates but those down the street, across the town, on the other side of the proverbial railroad or political aisle.

And yet, over the past few years, it seems that as a nation, it has become harder for us to see the humanity in those whose lives differ from our own, to listen with compassion, much less be able to sit at table with those who hold opinions that do not mesh with our own.

The Most Rev. Michael Curry, Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church, along with other self-described “religious Elders” in the United States have wrestled with what they call the “profound division and genuine crisis of national character.”⁷ This group which includes Evangelical, Roman Catholic, and mainline Protestant leaders have asked Christians to fast, not just on this Ash Wednesday, but for the next five Wednesdays in Lent, and even beyond, for all of the remaining Wednesdays of this Christian year, until Advent I, November 25. In the words of Bishop Curry:³

“In times of great national concern and urgency, people of faith have returned to ancient practices of repentance, prayer and fasting as ways of interceding with G-d on behalf of their nation and the world. This is such a moment for us in the United States.

In his “Invitation to Turn and Pray on Behalf of our Nation,” Bishop Curry ask us to join him and other Christians in this weekly fast on behalf of the United States as it grapples with “violence, discord, and confusion.” And to pray. We are, in his words, “to take this Lent and really pray for the soul of our country. Not that we will be greater than anybody else – (but to) pray for the soul of our country.”⁸

And so, I also invite you to take this first step, to pray and fast, with tonight, this Ash Wednesday as the start, the pivot point, because despite the deep divide among our communities, we are all G-d’s children, we share in our human commonality, we are dust, and to dust we will return.

And yet, in the sign of the cross that will soon be drawn on each of our foreheads, in the dark mark made by ashes, is the very same sign that was made in oil at the time of our baptism.⁹

“You are sealed by the Holy Spirit in Baptism
and marked as Christ's own for ever.”

With G-d’s help, may each of us keep a Holy Lent, striving to fulfil our baptismal covenant: ashes to ashes, dust to dust, in the full and certain knowledge that in a little more than 40 days Easter comes, and once more we renew our baptismal vows.

⁷ Lent 2020: A Call to Prayer, Fasting, and Repentance Leading to Action, An Invitation from Presiding Bishop Curry to Turn and Pray on Behalf our Nation, <https://episcopalchurch.org/invitation-to-fast>

⁸ Quoted in ‘The soul of our country’: A conversation with the presiding bishop on his Lenten call for prayer and fasting, by Egan Millard of the Episcopal News Service. Posted Feb 20, 2020 at <https://www.episcopalnewsservice.org/2020/02/20/the-soul-of-our-country-a-conversation-with-the-presiding-bishop-on-his-lenten-call-for-prayer-and-fasting/>

⁹ Book of Common Prayer, 1979, page 308