

## Ash Wednesday 2015

This night we come together to begin another season in our life together. Lent is a season like no other, as it calls us to re-focus our lives in a dramatic way, with themes that can seem foreign in our daily lives, and in the wider world outside of church. For those of us who have been Episcopalian (or Catholic) from a very young age, our go-to memories of Lent involve having been shamed into some personal trial of self-denial of candy, chocolate, soda, or a favorite TV show, a trial more often truly borne by those around us, as we became grumpy and fractious in our sacrifice. I will tell you that Mark still calls the delicious pop of a Diet Coke being opened at 4 AM on Easter Morning the sound of resurrection. Anyone who hangs around me for long knows that any virtue-laden thoughts on my part of that particular Lenten reform leading to a lifetime of abstinence from my coffee-equivalent were clearly ill-conceived.

As we mature in our faith and understanding of our liturgical heritage, our concept of Lent matures with us, becoming a season less about the challenges of physical self-denial, and more about facing uncomfortable spiritual questions not easily tackled: What have we done and left undone, individually and collectively? What have we invited into our lives that gets in the way of right relationship with God and others? In what ways do we nurture a hardness of heart? Where are we quite comfortable at the expense of others who have born the cost of our preferences? Is there a disconnection between our defense of our rights and privileges, and the command of Jesus to love others as ourselves? Where have our blind spots been the result of holding our own hands tightly over our own closed eyes?

We ask these tough questions as we begin to follow Jesus in the Gospels as part of our Good Book Club. By the second Sunday of Lent we will hear three gospels every Sunday until Palm Sunday. We will accompany Jesus from his birth, through his ministry on Earth, all the way to Holy Week when we prepare ourselves to follow him to the cross.

How can we be ready to take such a journey? As we go to our spiritual closets to prepare ourselves, we might find some dusty Lenten concepts, what Barbara Brown Taylor calls the fossils of salvation: ***sin, transgression and iniquity; repentance, penance, and atonement; reconciliation and redemption.*** These words which are mostly derived from Latin and Middle English in the 14<sup>th</sup> Century, are still on the packing list for a 40 day Lenten journey of self-reflection

and self-examination in community, moving towards new ways of seeing how--- even with all good intentions---we *all* fall short of the glory of God. So let's take them out, dust them off, and prepare for this Lenten trip we are about to take together.

As it is my habit to get the worst done first, let's pick up *sin*, *transgression* and *iniquity*---the heavy words that I would just as soon leave in storage. The online dictionary defines ***sin*** as an *especially willful or deliberate violation or transgression of divine law or moral principle; a reprehensible or regrettable action, behavior, or offense*. Those black dots drawn on a white milk bottle representing sin on a pure white soul by the nuns who taught me in Catholic school could not come close to illustrating something reprehensible. Softer definitions of sin include a state of separation from God, or ***trespass*** as when crossing a line or climbing a fence, intentionally or unintentionally, creating unwelcome consequences or distress to others. We ask to be forgiven our trespasses every time we pray the Lord's Prayer. ***Transgression*** is defined as *the act that causes the offense*. ***Iniquity*** (from a root word meaning "uneven") is immoral or grossly unjust behavior, the quality of being unfair or wicked on a grand scale.

I have heard the argument many times that if we just keep the Ten Commandments, (and hold others to them) then we shouldn't have to worry about anything else. Some will say with great conviction, that if we just "do what the Bible says," then we will do right by God and won't have any problems. However, now that we are reading the *whole Bible*, we find a complicated story, with much sin and iniquity in it. The Ten Commandments do not quite cover every transgression found recorded in Holy Scripture, and I am not sure that some of our biblical characters should be held up as perfect models of behavior.

Let's move on to ***repentance***, ***penance***, and ***atonement***. ***Repentance*** is defined as a feeling of regret, sorrow, or contrition, with the verb *to repent* meaning to *turn around*, to rededicate oneself and make amends. ***Penance*** is punishment imposed by oneself or by another which represents acknowledgement of having done wrong and feeling remorse. One ritual from my childhood was being sent weekly into the confessional to speak my bad acts aloud and being given a quantity of memorized prayers to say that I was taught were necessary for God's forgiveness. Two Our Fathers and three Hail Marys were the standard for the expected recitation of the childhood sins of lying, back-talking parents or (God forbid) impure thoughts, whatever that was supposed to mean to a third grader. On its face, the ritual was a sham in the face of the greater evils in the world at the

time, sometimes right under our noses, but the ritual at least gave foundational gravity to the idea of individual responsibility for our own behaviors.

**Atonement** is a weightier word, implying reparation or satisfaction for an offence or injury. To the Christian, atonement means the reconciliation of God and humankind through the sacrificial work of Jesus Christ. If we go back to the concept of sin as separation from God, our atonement, our *at-one-ment* with God is accomplished fully and completely only in Christ. Our journey with Jesus through Lent shows us that there is no other way, no other truth, no other life that works for us. It is because of the atonement of Jesus Christ that **reconciliation** and **redemption** are much easier words to pack. Full of promise and grace, they sustain us in the journey, leading to places of wholeness and right relationship with God and others, beyond what we could hope for, beyond what we deserve.

It is no accident that the Season of Lent coincides with the season of Spring. Cold nights give way to warm rainy days and cooler sunny ones, and it is time to dig in the dirt. It is time to pick up and pull away the dead leaves and sticks that have accumulated over the winter, feeding compost piles with what has died away. It is time to prepare the ground and plant new things, and to wait for life to push itself out of the ground again. Lent can be much like this---not a season to be groveling in our guilt, but rather one of working in our dirt, turning up and composting what has died in us, and making room for the promise of rebirth: cultivating forgiveness, and opening ourselves up to some redemption of old guilts, old habits, old resentments, old pain. Lent is a time to listen *more* and talk *less*, to serve *more* and expect *less*, a time to examine what we treasure, and to explore what Jesus meant when he told us to look for it in our hearts.

For some of us this will mean turning around to revisit some place in our lives that might need extra grace; to re-examine entrenched opinions; to allow our deep preferences to make room for something new and unexpected. For others it will be a time to consider those places of long-held resentment that could be softened by light penetrating from a slightly different angle, and to see that a stance of un-forgiveness is a source of pain for ourselves as well as for others.

For some of us it could be a time to consider that our deep anxiety of failure or our life-long sense of unworthiness might need some mercy, allowing us to lay some things down and live in the uncertainty of the imperfect. For others it could be a time to take stock of those things left undone—a broken relationship that has been calling to us, or a long-abandoned promise of self-care that we unfailingly let burrow to the bottom of the pile of life-stuff that we can no longer see around.

These can be loaded expectations, because even as we all *have* sinned and have fallen short of the glory of God, we all have scars; we all carry pain. At times we are so weighed down by our own history, our afflictions, our burdens we are already bearing for others, that there is not one more minute in the day to offer to God, to ourselves, or to anyone else. We identify with Job, who felt when he had already lost everything that was important to him, that God could not possibly ask of him one more thing. Sackcloth and ashes are a mockery to one who already feels like a cold hard bulb in the ground. And yet, this season is also one of hope, when we are asked to wait for the rain and the sun, and to believe in the promise of each tiny new miracle of life pushing slowly out of the dirt.

No one is expected to make a Lenten journey alone. Some maps and road signs have been put in place for doing this together at St. Anne's.

- If you receive the online newsletter, you should have received this morning your first St. Anne's edition of daily **Morning Prayer**. Praying the Daily Office from the Book of Common Prayer is one of the goals of *Salt and Light*, and this online version is designed to be accessible and flexible to work into your lives during Lent.
- You can sign up to be matched with a **Lenten Prayer Partner** if you do it by tonight, and you can pray for each other.
- If you are a teenager, you can participate with EYC in **Lent Madness**, learning about important Saints in Christian history.
- You can attend the **Lenten Workshop** at St. Anne's on Saturday February 28, from 9-3, where we will explore **Praying, Healing, and Caring** as expressions of loving one another.
- You can learn more about the Episcopal Church in Fr. Lonnie's **Episcopal 101 Class**, beginning Sunday afternoons February 22 – March 29.
- You can participate in an **Iconography Workshop** led by Lisa Kent March 13-15.
- You can attend the **Tifton Community Lenten Lunch** at 12 noon on Wednesdays through April 1.

- You can participate in our **Midweek Eucharist** on Wednesday evenings at 6, in addition to Sunday morning worship,
- You can come to daily services every evening in **Holy Week**, leading up to the **Easter Vigil**, the most important and glorious liturgy in the Episcopal tradition.

The message here is: you are not on this trip alone.

We take our first steps tonight. Soon we will kneel, to accept a cross of ashes on our foreheads, remembering that we were created from dirt, and that life is a gift---transitory, temporary, finite—from God. We will acknowledge our need for repentance, and remember that we are redeemed as spoken by the psalmist tonight:

He has not dealt with us according to our sins,  
 nor rewarded us according to our wickedness.  
 For as the heavens are high above the earth,  
 so is his mercy great upon those who fear him.  
 As far as the east is from the west,  
 so far has he removed our sins from us.

Then we will kneel again, holding out our hands for the Living Bread of reconciliation. We will take and eat, because we are Easter people, and because we know that our God is with us, wherever this Lenten journey takes us, until we arrive at the empty tomb. May our travels this Holy Lent be blessed, as in this benediction from Isaiah:

then your light shall rise in the darkness  
 and your gloom be like the noonday.  
 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.

Amen