

Epworth Chapel on the Green
February 18, 2015
Ash Wednesday
Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

Joel 2:1-2, 12-17
Psalm 103:8-14
I Corinthians 5:20-6:10
Matthew 6:1-21

As we approach the beginning of our Lenten journey tonight, I begin with a question: *What does Lent mean to you?*

That is an important question, because Lent is both a personal as well as communal journey.

As we ponder that question tonight, I'd like to begin by sharing with you *what I hope Lent does not mean for you.*

First, I hope that Lent does *not* mean being constantly reminded of how worthless you are, or constantly berating yourself for your weaknesses and inadequacies.

Second, I hope that Lent does *not* mean for you the season where you think to yourself, "I have to grit my teeth and get through this."

Third, I hope that Lent does *not* mean for you the constant message that you have no worth or value apart from what God sees in you.

Fourth, I hope that Lent does *not* mean for you that you must "give up" things, even though you may not be entirely sure why.

You get my point, which is that for many, Lent is understood in primarily *negative* ways. I don't believe it needs to be this way. While it is true that the season is marked by a focus on disciplined practices and inner examination, our perspective can make all the difference in whether we see things positively or negatively.

To gain some perspective, let's look at our texts for the day. They reveal at least three themes that can give our Lenten journey some definition.

Starting with Joel and with Psalm 51, there is the theme of *penitence*.

Admittedly, this text from Joel seems a bit abrasive, a bit harsh. Joel tells the people that they have drifted off course, that they are traveling in the wrong direction. And so he asks them to come together *corporately* where he tells them: “rend your heart, not your garments, and return to the Lord.”

Now the dictionary defines *penitance* as: “regret for one's wrongdoing or sinning.”

That's great, but the Bible takes it a bit further. In the Bible, being *penitent* is part of *repentance*, which is a *process* more than an isolated act. Joel says “rend your heart.” This implies looking inward, reflection, and examining your conscience. Doing so leads to confession, and where possible, taking action to attempt to repair the damage caused by sin.

This leads to Psalm 51, a prominent penitential psalm. David has opened his heart and looked deep within. And what he acknowledges is a key theme of Lent and a foundational truth of life. David acknowledges that *often in life we are our own worst enemy*. And we need help. We cannot change things by ourselves.

Penitence, then, is not simply feeling bad so that Jesus can make you feel better. It is a willingness to open up your heart and to look closely at your life. So, as you begin your Lenten journey tonight, perhaps you might benefit from asking this question: *In what ways am I my own worst enemy?*

As you ponder that question in the next few weeks, the Holy Spirit may just come along side you and offer to help you in this area of your life.

Second, our texts tonight speak of the theme of *reconciliation*. This is true in our Epistle lesson from 2 Corinthians.

The context for Paul's words here involves the idea that the treasure of the Gospel has been placed in earthen vessels, i.e., that God's greatest act of love was to become an earthen vessel. The effect of this was *reconciliation*, the bringing together of relationships torn asunder. God has reconciled us to Himself through Christ, says Paul, and the fruit of that is our reconciliation with one another.

But for Paul the important point here is that what most people would consider failure (our brokenness and weakness) actually becomes the way for us to

live into the Gospel. That is, *our brokenness in community is the primary place where our reconciliation with God and one another takes place.*

In these next few weeks, it may be worth asking yourself: *How is God at work through the broken people in my life? How is God at work through my own brokenness?* You may be surprised at what the Holy Spirit reveals to you.

Finally, our texts tonight reveal the Lenten theme of *Disciplined Practices.* This theme surfaces in our Gospel lesson from Matthew.

There is no question that the Christian life is about *discipline.* But such a reality can, if we are not careful, plunge us down into a vortex of legalism, of pursuing practices in an effort to curry favor or acceptance with God.

But it need not be this way. Michael Yankoski, in his book *The Sacred Year*, shares a helpful analogy regarding spiritual disciplines. He uses the image of the sailboat. Picture yourself out at Lucky Peak or Lake Lowell (or your favorite body of water). You're on your sailboat. Now, the wind is already present and surrounding you. It is there, regardless of what you do. But if you trim your sails and make the necessary adjustments, you'll be able to capitalize on the wind's power and it can take you on an exciting journey.

It's probably no coincidence that a prominent image for the Holy Spirit in the New Testament is that of "wind," or "breath." Spiritual disciplines can be a way of "trimming your sails" in order to allow God to have access to your life.

And one of the blessings of emphasizing spiritual practices during Lent is simply this: *Sometimes in life we pursue the wrong things. Adapting different practices can be a way to experience God's help.* We don't engage in the practices in order to curry favor with God, or to fill in a checklist. We do so in an effort to "trim our sails" so that the wind can take us on an exciting journey.

What, then, does Lent mean for you?

Our lessons for today answer that question by revealing the themes of penitence, reconciliation, and practices. Penitence can lead us to the insight that we are our own worst enemy. But acknowledging our brokenness paves the way for our reconciliation to God and to one another, and helps us to begin to practice those things that are the fruit of reconciliation.

Whatever this Lenten season may hold in store for you, I pray that it will be a positive and edifying time. And may God also grant us His grace to make this journey together.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.