

Isaiah 58:1-12

Psalm 103

2 Corinthians 5:20b-6:10

Matthew 6:1-6,16-21

Have you ever stopped to think how many times a day you look at yourself in a mirror? It may be more times than you think. Most of us do it as a matter of course when we're getting ready for the day. We brush our teeth and maybe wash our face. Sometimes we examine the skin on our face to see just how wrinkled or blotched it has become. The men may look in the mirror to shave and the women may look in it to put on their make-up and hide as many flaws as they can. Sometimes we take a look in the mirror as we dress to see if we have everything on straight and as it should be. And sometimes we look at ourselves in the mirror simply because we are passing by one and our own image catches our eye. When we stop and think about it, we probably gaze at ourselves in a mirror more times in one day than we realize. Whether we admit it or not, we human beings seem to be fascinated with our own image...and with the images of people we love and even people that we simply know at a distance. What we see in a mirror or what we see in an image that we stop to gaze at can affect us in profound ways. It almost always stirs some kind of emotion from pleasure to downright disgust. And even if we think we are going to see something horrifying, we seem compelled to look anyway. One thing is for certain. Once you've seen something...you can't 'unsee' it. The image will be with you forever. You might store it in the back of your brain if it's too upsetting, but it's always there nevertheless.

Today is Ash Wednesday...the beginning of the season of Lent. When we get ready for bed tonight we might very well see the remains of a smudged cross on our foreheads in the mirror above the sink as we get ready to brush our teeth. That smudged cross of ashes holds very special meaning for us. It is calling us to remember some profound truths about ourselves. We are dust. And to dust we shall return. It is an outward and visible sign of an inward and sometimes terrifying truth...each and every one of us is mortal. Each and every one of us will die to this life at some point. None of us will get out of here alive. That's a pretty sobering and humbling thought. We do not live on this earth and in this life forever. We don't even occupy the same bodies for all of our earthly lives. Our bodies change over time...from the gawky ones we had as little children to the unpredictable ones we had as adolescents to the ones we get as adults. As we go through the years, our skin gets wrinkled. Our hair may get thin or change color or both. Our muscles don't work as well as our bodies age and we don't have the energy we had when our bodies were younger. We are reminded with every birthday that this life is not indefinite and this body is wasting away with every day that goes by. Those facts alone are

pretty sobering. Bringing those facts into sharp focus prompts us to take a look...not just in the mirror...but to how we are using this time that we have in this life. Have you thought about that lately? How *are* you using your currency of time?

While looking in a mirror may be fun or fascinating, looking at ourselves...realistically...is pretty terrifying for most of us. But that's exactly what the season of Lent is calling us to do. This season is a time of self-examination...of looking at ourselves realistically and honestly. It requires us to steel ourselves against looking at the very parts of ourselves that we would rather believe do not exist. We don't really want to see our sinful side...but we all have one just as surely as we have human bodies to move around in on earth. We all know what our human bodies look like. We see them every day in a mirror, but do we take a look at our souls? Do we know what our souls look like? That's a little more difficult, isn't it? God has provided some built-in shields to protect us from seeing too much that would simply undo us. It's more than just shielding us from how other people see us. It shields us from seeing our true selves...which for most of us would be a pretty traumatic experience. So Lent can be not only a time of remembering our mortality...or a time for humbling ourselves. It can also be a time when we can be terrified and heartbroken if we get a glimpse of our true selves. Remember. There's no way any of us can 'unsee' something.

However, we can't and don't make amends for what we cannot or do not see, so in order for us to work our way through Lent with contrite hearts, we need to be able to summon the courage to look at our souls in the mirror...not just our faces. When we can look at ourselves honestly, we can begin to identify some things for which we feel remorse; some things for which we want to ask for forgiveness; some things about ourselves that we would like to change; some things about ourselves that embarrass us; some things about ourselves that we want to offer up to God and ask God to remove them from us. Some things we can't do by ourselves. But we have to look first before we can do anything. And that's hard and it's painful. These forty days of Lent give us the time to do all this necessary looking and the strength of God gives us the power to see ourselves honestly and realistically.

No matter what we see in that mirror that shows us our souls, we won't forget it. And we need to remember also that we are not alone in doing this soul-searching introspection. The God who created us and loves us is standing beside us. As we are struggling with seeing the parts of ourselves that we do not like or are ashamed of...remember this one thing. The God who created us in our mother's womb loved us when we were created and loves us still. That God loves us enough to continue to love us whether we get things right or not. That God loves us enough to send his Son into an earthly body to teach us about God...to walk with us, to heal us, to teach us, to love us and to ultimately die an earthly death for us. That God loves the person

we were created to be whether we've fulfilled that expectation or not. That God loves even our flaws and our sinfulness and the parts of us that we can barely stand to face. God loves every single part of each of us and has not forgotten a single one of us.

Lent is not only a time of humility and contrition, it's a time of self-discovery. It is a time of forgiveness of others and forgiveness of ourselves. It is the time of accepting the forgiveness that God provides for us when we offer up to God all those parts of ourselves that we wish we did not have and that we would rather not see and would just as soon deny as ours to own.

This Lent...look yourself in the mirror every day...more than once if you need to. Take a good hard look...an honest look...and allow yourself to see yourself as God sees you...the perfect creature that God created. And in your humility offer up to God your whole self...the good...the bad...and the ugly...all of which has been redeemed by the loving offering of Jesus Christ. Lent is the time to live more honestly into ourselves and to strengthen our connection with our Creator. And to prepare ourselves for the ultimate sacrifice that Jesus made for us and the unimaginable gift of everlasting life that he provided for us.

Thanks be to God.

AMEN