

Ash Wednesday: Return to the Lord

Well, it's that time of the year again: time to decide what to give up, or what to take on; time to dust off our Bibles and actually read them; time to pack up the chocolate, or beer, or soda, or Ritz crackers. It's time to put on ashes, and to be reminded that we are but dust.

"What on earth is this all about?" people may be wondering; some of us may even be wondering. Some of us may even be wondering, though we've done this for years. *Why* do we single out this time to reflect on sin and death (not the most uplifting topics)? *Why do* we take on Lenten disciplines? *Why* do we wear ashes on our forehead, and stop saying alleluia, and start spending so much time on our knees, confessing what's wrong?

I've spent many a Lent dodging these questions, the "why" questions, and focusing instead on the "how" and "what": What will I fast from? What kind of prayer do I want to take on? And for how long—is 20 minutes a day enough? Can I squeeze in 30? How am I going to spend more time with Scripture—should I use a book of meditations or follow Fr. Keith's reading plan for Matthew (which, as his associate, I highly recommend)?

How can I structure these forty days to make myself better, more pious, worthier of salvation?

So I end up crafting an ambitious self-improvement plan—a spiritual to-do list that tackles my vices and bad habits and that looks a lot like my New Year's Resolutions. I want tangible results; I want to mark my progress; I want to know what success looks like, so I can make it happen. And I'll work hard, to create that clean heart, to renew that right spirit. I'll work hard to do God's work in me—because it seems so much easier to take care of it myself than to surrender and wait for the slow miracle of conversion.

In short, I'll do Lent the same way I do everything else.

But when Lent becomes about my achievement, my self-control, my piety, my performance, I'm probably a lot like the hypocrites that Jesus criticizes in our Gospel—the ones who seem to have forgotten *why* they're giving alms, or praying, or fasting. Who seem to think that **it's all about them**.

Here's the thing, Jesus tells us: God's not asking for more striving or controlling. God doesn't need you to prove yourself. God wants something different. God wants you. Simply you.

"Yet even now," God says through the prophet Joel, "return to me with all your heart.... Return to the Lord, your God, for God is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and relents from punishing."

And while we may long to return, the problem for many of us is that we're too busy running. Away. In the other direction. If we want to return to God, we have to start by acknowledging the things that we're running from—the things that keep us from coming home. We have to turn around and face them, and pray about them, and seek the help we need to break past them.

Now, no one else can name these things for you. Only you know what you're running from; only you know what really stands between you and God.

But today's readings and liturgy suggest some things that we have in common—some things that we all have to face on our journey back to God.

We run and run and run **from death**. Our culture even encourages this: it idolizes youth and seduces us with promises of staying young forever through plastic surgery, and hair replacement treatments, and flashy sport cars. It offers immortality through accomplishment or fame or children or a memorial brick with your name on it. And we buy it, don't we? We buy the myth that we have to make ourselves immortal in some way, that we have to leave our mark on the world, or we'll have lived in vain.

And we run and run **from sin and evil**—from the brokenness of our world, and from the haunting awareness of all the ways that we have missed the mark, and are still missing it.

We run and run from **shame**, from the fear that we are defined by all that is wrong with us—that we are unlovable, unworthy, unacceptable.

And we bury our shame, we numb our pain, we run to **addictions**. Had a bad day at work? Wash it down with a glass of wine! Worry about being alone? Surround yourself with people! Feel a nagging hole when you are still? Well then, stay busy!

But **today**, we stop running, and turn around and **face our fear of death**. Today, we'll let our mortality show—with ashes on our foreheads. Today we remember that “we are dust, and to dust we shall return.” Today, we turn around and **face our sinfulness**, the power we've given over to evil. Today, we “lament our sins and acknowledge our wretchedness.” Today, we kneel and confess our sins, a lot of sins—a whole litany of sins. And we'll confess over and over in Lent, both in our liturgy, and, if you're really brave, in the Rite of Reconciliation with a priest. And today, we turn around and name **our addictions**, our particular ways of hiding from hurt and fear and shame.

This is an important part of Lenten disciplines: they help us admit the power we've given over to things—the treasures we've been building on earth. They encourage us **to feel the holes** we are so eager to fill with busy-ness and food and Facebook.

Today, we try to stop running, numbing, and hiding, at least for 40 days. Today, we turn around, toward God.

In a few minutes, we'll be invited to keep a holy Lent, to step off of the treadmill of self-improvement and self-gratification and self, self, self. We'll be invited to turn around and spend some time in the wilderness we've been avoiding—the wilderness in which we face our mortality and sinfulness and empty treasures—and whatever else you need to confront there.

This is a frightening, humbling journey. I, for one, want to know I won't be left behind, or get lost in the wilderness. That I won't drown in shame, or be overcome by the darkness that I might let in. I want to know that God will meet me in the wilderness and lead me through it to the other side.

This is a journey into trust. And faith.

But be encouraged. This is a journey **we take together, with Jesus** as our guide and companion. This is a journey we take with the conviction that **God abounds in mercy and steadfast love**. We travel with **God's promises in our pockets**: the promise that God will answer death with eternal life, and sin with forgiveness, and hurt with healing.

If you're feeling a bit overwhelmed right now, relax! Take a deep breath. This isn't a sprint; it's a marathon that will take a life-time. You don't have to do it all this Lent; you *can't* do it all this Lent. What you can do is take some first steps--experiment, and practice, and learn.

It may be that this year, you start by taking a closer look at yourself, and at one particular way of hiding and numbing—and you realize that you aren't ready to let go of it. It may be that this year, you start simply by praying for help. *And let me tell you, that's a good place to start.*

The good news is that God will wait for you, for us, as long as it takes. God will never stop calling us back, or drawing us home. The good news is that God is “gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love.”

You see, Lent isn't about us at all. It's not about you or me; it's not about what we give up or how successful we are at our new discipline; it's not about making ourselves better or worthier. It's about God. It's about God's eternal desire for us to return. It's about God's grace, and mercy, and steadfast love.