

Today is the holy day in which we begin the season of Lent. Ash Wednesday, along with Good Friday near the end of this same season, are the two most somber days of the church's year. On Good Friday, we remember our Lord's sacrificial death to bring us the forgiveness of our sins. Today we remember our own mortality and the sins we have committed. The two days connect us with Christ and with one another so that we remember our sinfulness-- and Christ's forgiveness; and we remember that one day we will die-- and yet we have hope through Christ's death and resurrection.

Because of the somberness of this day and season, many of us approach them with our head down and our hearts heavy. In a few minutes, we will have ashes marked on our heads, calling to mind the use of "sackcloth and ashes" by people in mourning in ancient days. Our approach on this day can seem at times like the description of fasting criticized in the readings from Isaiah and Matthew. As moving as this service can be, it is important for our soul work that it be more than an outward show of contrition. How can we do that? How can we offer our hearts to God and ask God to continue to transform us during this holy season?

There are three changes we can undertake today and through Lent to help us participate in the transformation that God is doing in our lives and in the world:

The first change is in **how we see God**. The beginning of the collect for Ash Wednesday has important words for us to remember, words that describe who God is, "Almighty and everlasting God, you hate nothing you have made..." God loves us. God loves all of creation of which we are a part. There is no doubt about us in God—God knows our limitations for God made us. God knows our potential for great good-- and great harm. Yet in that gray area of our freedom and God's forgiveness and grace, God lives with us to show us the way we should go. God abides with us to inspire us to follow the right path.

That is the good news for us. Through Christ, God does not despise nor judge us from a distance. God does not look down at us without pity. Rather we believe and proclaim that God became one of us. God-made-human in Christ experienced human life in all its fullness-- and at times its pettiness and tedium. God chose to do that so that we would understand that God understands what it is to be human; not only because of God's omniscience, but also based on God's immersion in human life. That truth of the gospel should forever change how we see God and, because of that, how we journey through Lent. Our light in the darkness during this holy season is the light of God's love in the face of Jesus Christ.

The second change, based on the truth made known about God through Jesus, is **how we see ourselves**. We *are* sinners—but we are more than that, too. We are creatures marked with the image of God. When we look in the mirror, when we pause and reflect on our lives, we are able to see glimpses of God. Yes we will die one day. Yes we fall short in many ways in what we say and do. That is why we pray for God's help and ask for forgiveness. But despite those

human sins and frailties, there is something about each one of us that is deeply pleasing to God. There is a dignity in being human that each one of us carries.

So when we get up in the morning, instead of being distracted by the busyness we anticipate (or dread); instead of remembering the grudge we hold against someone that we set aside while we slept; instead of our worries about many things, we can remember the one thing that matters—I am beloved by God. And if I believe I am precious to God, I can relax this day and trust my Creator to help and guide me through whatever I may face, big or small. I am able by God's grace to follow Christ Jesus as my Lord; and when I fall, I can be forgiven, get up, and begin again. That is my identity as a human being. That is so important to remember as we go through Lent-- I am a forgiven child of God, alive with the Christian hope of the resurrection.

The third change we can undertake for Lent is **how we see the world around us**. If we believe God truly loves and forgives us and that we are made in that loving God's image, then our encounters with other people as well as other parts of creation need to reflect that truth. If I am beloved of God, so are my neighbors—and strangers and even enemies. God's love overflows into the world and it is only through human sin that it can be dammed up for a season until it breaks through to fulfill God's intended purpose.

This last change is in some ways the hardest. We may begin Lent with faith that God is loving and even that I am made in the image of that loving God. The rubber hits the road, so to speak, with those other people. Does God really love them, too? Because if God does love them, then, if I really believe in God, I am called-- and accountable-- to love them with no excuses. And to be honest, that is often hard (at least for me).

Because as the prophet Isaiah said, God doesn't care much about our religious ceremonies, especially if they do not reflect a change of life. If I repent in here for these few minutes, God calls me to carry that repentance with me outside of these church doors. Like Isaiah pointed out, there is a world all around us that is hurting and our lives are part of God's medicine to bring healing to those in pain.

This Lent, we don't necessarily need to start with the big things like bringing the homeless poor into our house. But we can do something. What I have asked the vestry to do and what I mentioned in our most recent newsletter is for us to go into the world—especially the parts we often avoid—and pay attention. Open our eyes to see what others see. Open up a conversation with a stranger and then listen to what is on their mind. Read or listen to the news, not with a defensive posture and a ready explanation for what's wrong; but instead with an open heart and a keen mind to challenge what we have always believed.

That approach will lead us to a different type of Lent— a Lent lived not with our head down but with our head up and our eyes open, paying attention to God's beloved world. And when we do that, I believe that with God's grace our beliefs and actions will fall in line with Isaiah's description of God's desired fast.

This Lent, we may come to question a long held political belief based on the new information we learn. We may dig deeper to give more of our time and effort and money to help those in need. We may weep about what we learn and we may feel compelled to tell others about it, too. That is the Lent we are called to take part in this year. That is a Lent that follows our Lord in the way of the cross and truly takes part in his sacrifice-- not only for the forgiveness of our own sins but for the healing of our world. Amen.