

“Make Room to Believe”
The Reverend Allison M Caudill
The 1st Sunday in Lent – February 21st 2021

For the past two weeks, I’ve posed the same question to many different people. I’ve asked young couples preparing for marriage, I’ve asked my circle of faithful Bible Study attendees, I’ve asked my friends and family, I’ve even asked my mentors. How is your prayer life lately? How are you feeling, going into Lent? Despite the wide variety of audiences, the reactions have all been variations on a theme. Shrugs, uncomfortable silence, and scrunched up faces avoiding eye contact with my face on their computer screen. Even those most steadfast in prayer and faithful in study will admit that, since last Ash Wednesday, their spiritual life and self-care practices have suffered. One delightfully honest individual shared with me “This has been the longest Lent of my life, I can’t believe it’s happening all over again!” It is true that as Christians in community, we have experienced a fast like never before in our lifetime. Although some have broken their fasts sooner or differently than others, we have all over the past year fasted from major aspects of our individual and common lives. We have fasted from live entertainment and performance art, we’ve fasted from restaurants and coffee shops and shopping malls. We’ve fasted from in-person worship, from group activities, from our classrooms and offices and gyms. We’ve lost touch not only with our weekly routine of Sunday morning worship and study, but also many of our daily practices of faith. The seasonal markers that are so important to our sense of time have been lost or significantly altered, leading to this nearly universal sense that last Lent never actually ended, that Ash Wednesday has snuck up on us all. Think for a moment how you might answer my question, if you were being vulnerable and honest. How is your prayer life lately? What is your posture, as we transition into this season of Lent? *(If you are watching this as a recording, I’d encourage you to pause the video, take some*

time, and write down your response. I find it is often easier to be honest with ourselves in writing)

The squirmy discomfort that I've seen reflected back to me when I ask this question of folks in all ages and stages of faith is familiar. It's the familiar feeling from childhood of being caught off guard by a teacher's question, and being forced to admit that you didn't do the reading. It's guilt, and shame, and a painful recognition of falling short of expectations. It is an entirely natural response. But it isn't an answer to the question.

So many of us, throughout our lives, have internalized to some degree the sentiment that we are not good enough. Many of us, in fact I would venture to say that most of us in this particular time and place in history, believe that our worth is intrinsically linked to our productivity, to what we can do and create and contribute. So when I ask you, "how is your prayer life?" with this collar around my neck, that internalized definition of worth reframes the question as "Are you doing what I think you're supposed to do?" This same disquieting perspective is what many of us bring to the penitential season of Lent, especially as the pandemic fast drags on. We come into the penitential atmosphere of Ash Wednesday, the Great Litany, the forty days in the wilderness, full of so much shame and guilt that we dare not lift our gaze to meet the searching eyes of Jesus. When we enter a season of preparation with this much weight on our shoulders, we are too weak to reach out for the gifts that are offered to us by living into liturgical time. How can we joyfully shout our Easter Alleluias if we still have our arms full of all the ways we've fallen short?

"And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness." Mere moments after the universe-rending acting of receiving baptism at the hands of the prophet John, in the same breath that brought the Spirit down from heaven to rest like a crown on his head, Jesus enters into a

wild place far from the comforts of community. Being in the wilderness makes space for Jesus to absorb the weight of the message from heaven. “You are my beloved Son, with you I am well pleased.” In preparation for a ministry of miracle, proclamation, and communion, the Son of God leaves behind everything except his identity, the belovedness affirmed in his baptism. Jesus spends this time much as we are called to, facing and naming those things which are of the evil one. In Mark’s Gospel we are not privy to the glamorous details of this cosmic dialogue between the divine good and the manifestation of Evil, we know only that Jesus was tested, that he was in the company of wild animals, and that the angelic servants of God waited on him. Only after he has spent a good long while out there in the wilds does Jesus return to society, on the heels of John the Baptist’s arrest, to echo the prophet’s proclamations.

“The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.” Repent, and believe in the Good News. That proclamation, that message which was so crucial that it brought the Son of God to the riverside to be baptized, is in that order for a reason. Repent, and believe. To repent is to actively review our lives, our choices and the impacts of our actions, and to turn away from those things which we now see are not of God. To be penitent, which is what we are called to be in these forty days, is to be in a state of turning, of repenting. Jesus at the start of his ministry preached that all who heard him must repent, and believe. In repenting, in being penitent, we make space in our hearts and in our lives for belief. In order to gratefully and wholeheartedly receive the Good News, we must first lay down those things which are exhausting and distracting us. This is why we need Lent, even now.

When, on Ash Wednesday, we are invited to the observance of a Holy Lent, we are given some guideposts for what that observance can look like: self-examination and repentance; prayer, fasting, and self-denial; reading and meditating on God's holy Word. A short form of that

invitation this year might be asking yourself and one another “How is your prayer life?” Not as a “gotcha” or as an opportunity for shame and self-punishment. A truthful, hopeful reflection. How is my life in prayer? How am I making space for belief? The Heavens were torn apart with the force of God’s insistence that he loved his child, that Jesus was beloved, given to us as a testament to God’s unfailing love for us. Remember that this declaration of God’s love for God’s children occurs at the moment of baptism. Jesus has not worked a single miracle, has not yet proclaimed that the kingdom has come near, has not even yet called the first apostles. God’s love is not transactional. Your belovedness is not measured by your productivity or your performance or even your piety. God already loves you. Making the choice to repent, to hold a penitent posture for a season, is to choose to make more room for that love to fill you up and overflow into your life. You are beloved, and with you God is well-pleased. Make space for that truth. Repent, and believe.