

“Lent: At Time to Burn the Fields”

Date: Feb. 17, 2021

Place: Lakewood UMC

Occasion: Ash Wednesday

Text: Joel 2:1-2, 2-17; Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

Themes: Repentance; Death and Resurrection

Many years ago, Rev. Sharon Schwab, a now retired United Methodist pastor, wrote an article for our Conference newsletter. Back then it was a paper copy and was mailed to all of the churches. My, how times have changed! I'd like to begin my sermon today by sharing Pastor Schwab's reflection, and then I'll add a few of my own. She writes:

“As I think about Lent and about the way in which we prepare ourselves during Lent so that God can bring new growth into our lives, it reminds me of something I remember seeing frequently when I was a child.

“In the spring, many of the farmers would go into the fields and burn off the entire field. I never understood that. I knew that spring was the time when they would be planting, when they would be getting things ready to grow, and I never quite understood why they started with a destructive act - burning off the fields, destroying everything that was there before they began to plant.

“The reason the farmers burned the fields was because back then, in those days they didn't have herbicides, insecticides and pesticides that they do today. But they had a lot of things in the fields that needed to be destroyed before new growth could happen.

“If they plowed under all the things in the field, then those things would continue to be there and compete with new growth. The purpose of burning the fields was to rid the soil of the insects, fungus and the other diseases which might be there, to get rid of the left-over pieces from last year's crop – the broken stalks, stubble and roots.

“The burning is to get rid of the “blockage” so that the new crop can begin without the interference of all those things that had been there before. It created the possibility for new life and growth in that field.

“It’s an excellent image of what needs to happen in our lives during Lent. We need to burn off the fields. I think that’s what Lent is about for us Christians. We need to look at ourselves and see the crud that is laying there in our lives – the sickness, the sins, the diseases of the heart, the hatred, the unconcern for one another.

“All of those things which lay in our lives, almost dormant, but every time new growth begins, those things start to grow as well. They keep the new growth from sprouting as freely as it should. There are plenty of those things in our lives.

“In this Lenten season, we need to burn off the fields in our lives, and allow God to get rid of the crud, so that the blessings of resurrection can begin to grow anew in us. Lent is a time for God to create a new heart in us, a time for God to get rid of our transgressions, and for God to make us see our sins so that we can “burn them off”. And then God can restore to us the joy of our salvation. We can discover anew the growth which God wants to bring forth in our lives because of the resurrection.

“The question for us today as we begin the Lenten journey is: are you willing for God to burn off the fields of your life? Are you willing to confess your sins? Are you willing to allow God to create a new heart in you, so that new growth can begin without the interference of the old stuff?”

Lent is a time to burn the fields of our lives. I think Pastor Sharon has given us a great image to think about in terms of our spiritual lives. So, I began to think about this image and wondered how it applied to my life. What do I need to allow God to burn off, to allow new growth to occur?

One of the first things that came to my mind was my judgmentalism and my dualistic thinking, believing that things are good or bad, right or wrong. It leads to a good deal of prejudice and preconceptions about who people are, putting them into categories. Maybe you can identify. Perhaps we could allow God to burn this quality off, so that a kinder, gentler, more loving spirit could take its place.

Another thing that came to my mind was negativity, how quickly I can become negative in my thinking – about myself, the world and sometimes others. I'd like to ask God to burn off this field of negativity.

Many of us are growing weary with the pandemic, and how easy it is to fall prey to having a pity-party, thinking about all we have lost. If God burned down the field of negativity, maybe there would be new potential for gratitude and thankfulness.

What if we allowed God to burn off this field, and asked for a fresh planting of gratitude instead? Perhaps for Lent we could give up grumbling. Moaning and groaning and complaining do not give glory to God.

And what about that “field” known as procrastination? Are there things in each of our lives that we have been intending to do for God, but we just keep putting it off? Perhaps its Bible study, or prayer, starting a prayer journal, or doing some volunteer work for a worthy cause? What new growth might come if we burn off the undesirable trait of procrastinating?

No matter who we are, particularly in these polarized political times of ours, we all may be tempted with the sin of arrogance, self-righteousness, or holier-than-thou thinking. Does this reflect the love of Christ? Let's invite God to put a torch to that “field.”

Lent is a season of self-examination, reflection, confession and

repentance. That's really what we're talking about in this metaphor, of "burning the fields." What keeps new growth from happening in *your* life; what needs to go?

We might easily turn to the seven deadly sins – pride, envy, anger, sloth, greed, lust and gluttony. It seems that each of us struggles with one or more of these. "God, put a match to them and remove them from our lives, and replace them with something better."

But sometimes our sin is more subtle and nuanced. We can hide behind the protection of being respectable people who don't break the law and are good citizens. But is that all God asks of us? What sins are hiding beneath the veneer of respectability?

Are we as patient as we could be? Do we *always* tell the truth, the whole truth; or do we hide behind half-truths? Are we as generous as we could be, not only with our money but also with our time and talents?

Do we hold other people to a higher standard of conduct than we do ourselves? Or perhaps we are overly critical of ourselves as well, and need to burn the inner-critic who lives inside our head?

These are just some thoughts I had as we begin Lent. If God wants to give us a more glorious life, what fields must be burned so they don't interfere with the new growth God wants to give us? The Easter experience teaches us there is no resurrection without death.

So what might God be asking us to burn off, to die off, so that something new might take its place? If God shows it to us, I pray we are willing to let it happen. Burn off the fields, and let God begin new life in you. Amen? Amen!