

Jennifer and I have been watching episodes of “Treme” on DVD. “Treme” is an HBO series that wrapped at the end of 2013. It’s about life in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina laid waste to one of the city’s oldest neighborhoods—a neighborhood called Treme—an historically important source of African-American music and culture. The show follows musicians and chefs, construction workers and professors, and mostly working class folks trying to rebuild their lives, their homes and their unique culture in the aftermath of the 2005 hurricane and the levee failure that flooded 80 percent of the city, displacing hundreds of thousands of residents.

At the beginning of the series, more than half the population of New Orleans is elsewhere and much of the city lies in ruins, muddied and caked in mold. One of the stars of the show, New Orleans native Wendell Pierce, said this: “The disaster impacted people on every possible level; physically, emotionally, and spiritually. The only things people had to hang on to were the rich traditions we knew that survived the test of time before: our music, food and family, family that included anyone who decided to accept the challenge to return.”

I do not romanticize what happened to the people of New Orleans when I say that, over the course of its four-season run, the characters in Treme grow and live into the reality that they have always sensed—the reality that even with their homes and jobs and possessions gone, it’s good to be alive. As difficult and as dark as their problems really are, it is the communal spirit of the neighborhood that draws and keeps people, and that makes New Orleans such fertile storytelling territory.

“We are exercising,” Wendell Pierce went on, “our right of self-determination in the darkness with personal resolve. We are accessing the best of the human spirit and bringing light to this difficult time. That’s what ‘Treme’ is about.”

That’s mostly what Ash Wednesday is about too.

Despite our recent experience with water getting into parts of this house where it does not belong, you and I, of course, are not digging two feet of dried mud out of our boarded up living room while waiting for help that may never arrive. That being said, we are choosing to stand before an uncomfortable reality that comes to the forefront in those kinds of tragedies. The uncomfortable reality is this: regardless of what we own, where we were educated, who we live with or what religion we subscribe to, *regardless of all of these*, God has given each of us one, fragile, transitory, potentially whole, easily fractured life to live. And because that life is fragile, transitory, potentially whole, and easily fractured, it deserves a kind of bracing care: a time of reflection that both looks hard at where we trip ourselves up and opens little space to nurture the health that is in us.

We call that time Lent, and it begins today.

It's no surprise that our readings for this evening don't offer a kind of spiritual manual for how to make the best use of Lent, but they do warn us about some of the pitfalls. Both Joel and Matthew tell us not to get sidetracked by how what we do might appear to others. They warn us against doing things that are motivated to impress ourselves or someone else or even to match the conventional wisdom of the day about what a person should do in Lent. Rather, I believe, they call us to give up the behaviors that *get in the way* of our turning—or returning—to our wholeness in God. And they encourage us to do something that *builds* our store of heavenly treasure, that strengthens the positive and Godly inclinations of our hearts and minds.

People given the gift of discernment can be particularly adept at sussing out whether a person who feels called to Holy Orders as an ordained person or a monastic is running away from something or running toward something. They look for evidence that the person's spiritual life involves more than hiding from or denying past decisions or experiences. Part of all spiritual paths does rely on consciously turning away from habits or paths that have taken hold of us or that have led us away from God. But spiritual growth will flat-line or collapse if we do not also consciously add something to our lives that creates movement toward

the good, the positive, the loving—actions that create movement, that is, in the direction of God.

Lent is an opportunity to do some stripping away like disasters can, but in a more controlled and intentional way. During Lent, we can turn away from destructive or fracturing habits. But it is also an excellent opportunity to add something that builds our spirits, to put ourselves at risk for developing life-affirming, healing habits.

Lent is a time for anyone to take the fourth step of many twelve-step programs. The next forty days are an annual opening to make a searching and fearless inventory of yourself. When I say fearless, I do not mean you will have no feelings of fear. “Fearless” means you will not let your fears stop you from being thorough in the inventory process. What is getting between you and God? For some it is alcohol, drugs or sex. For others, work, money or food have taken a divisive priority. Have you become self-centered? Arrogant? Are you envious in a way that separates you from God and other people? If you think you *never* engage in any of these, you might want to contemplate your denial as a form of resistance.

Lent is a time to prayerfully consider the habit or habits we have allowed to develop that block the way to our having the life of wholeness that God wants for us. Tell yourself the truth—what do you think might be an obstruction? What is your payoff in holding on to this blockage? Lent is a time to learn more about that obstacle and a private confession is a good way to begin opening the clog.

But don’t stop there, because Lent is also an excellent opening to re-engage those things that you love, things that bring you to life, behaviors and practices that are touchstones for you: bring some daffodils to someone you like. Read a spiritually nourishing book. Wear something wildly colorful just for the fun of it. Say a prayer of thanksgiving for the gift of each new morning or for the gift of friends. Say a prayer for someone who really irritates you. Walk for the simple joy of movement. Eat just a little bit of a really great chocolate. Or eat a really ripe pear standing over the sink as a physical prayer of gratitude for God’s amazing creation. Make room to get more of these things going on in your life.

Do you know why? Because in a few minutes, I will mark your forehead with ashes and say, “Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return.” I can remember the first time I saw the ashes of someone who had died. They were in a plastic bag inside a cardboard box, and I was in charge of moving them into other containers for their committal. Those ashes do not look like the fine black ashes we will be using in a moment, but like beach sand and little pebbles.

And this is what it all comes to for each of us: after all the struggling, all the successes and all the failure; after all the relationships that lasted decades and those that lasted minutes; after all the frustration, all the laughter; after all the work and vacations and pets; after all our brilliance and all our mistakes—this is what it comes to. We are dust and to dust we will return. That’s not a sad statement, but it is certainly sobering. We are dust and to dust we will return. That’s not a worrisome statement, but one filled with wonder. We are dust and to dust we will return. That doesn’t have to be a fearful statement if we accept the invitation to let it make us somehow a little more free.

God has given us—you and I—one fragile, transitory, potentially whole, easily fractured life. That gift deserves a kind of bracing care: a time of reflection that looks hard at where we trip ourselves up and that opens a little space to nurture the health that is in us. A time of exercising a little self-determination in the darkness with personal resolve with God’s help. A time of accessing the best of the human spirit and allowing God to bring light to difficult times. That’s what a Holy Lent is about.