

The word “lent” that we use to name the season that starts this evening comes from an Old English word, *lencthen*, a reference to the approach of longer daylight hours as we move toward Spring. The Spring equinox will arrive two weeks before Easter Sunday this year. The ground is already softening. Crocuses and daffodils are already blooming, and nature seems eager to be bursting back into life.

And yet we have gathered here this evening to have our foreheads marked with ashes using words from our burial ritual: “Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return.” On the cusp of the coming of new life, we remind ourselves of our mortality. We practice death before we die. Outsiders wonder what we are up to or misunderstand entirely, because as Flannery O’Connor once wrote, “You shall know the truth and the truth shall make you odd.”

We *do* know the truth or maybe the more authentic way to say it is that we are trying to trust God’s truth. We worship the One God who brings new life out of death. The ashes that we will mark ourselves with in a moment are burned palm fronds saved from last year’s Palm Sunday. This will be the first symbol of Lent, marking us as we begin to commemorate the forty days Jesus spent in the desert. The black cross on our foreheads that prepares us to begin a forty day walk with Christ comes from the scorched remains of a previous walk.

Last year, St. Elizabeth, and you and I, and the people around us were different as we began the walk that we start again this year. People, practices, attitudes, relationships, circumstances—many of these things have changed, some have gone away, some are entirely new. You have a new rector. I have a new

parish. There is both death to be mourned and new life to be embraced in the year that has passed.

What remains constant is our desire to trust in the God who brings new life out of death. That is why we trace the ashen cross on our foreheads in the same pattern that was traced on our foreheads at baptism, when a priest or a bishop marked us with holy oil—*sealed* us as Christ's own forever.

Jesus began his forty days in the Mediterranean desert. We will hear the beginning of his story from Mark's Gospel next Sunday, and then in the weeks that follow, we will hear stories from the Gospels of Mark and John about what Jesus and his followers did on the way to Palm Sunday. Palm Sunday, the last Sunday in Lent, marks Jesus' triumphant entry to Jerusalem that turned to the ashes of humiliation and execution.

Lent is always a walk to Gethsemane. A walk toward the cross. But it is more, isn't it, because finally, it is a walk into the empty tomb and from there out into the world. We walk toward and embrace the mysterious, unending joy of the women who found the empty tomb; the awesome, overwhelming joy of Mary Magdalene, Salome, and Mary the mother of Joses and James the Younger. While we know how their walk concluded, we still must begin our own walk at the start.

Tonight, as Lent begins, we prepare ourselves so that we can join Jesus in the desert on Sunday. After six Sundays, at the Saturday evening Easter vigil, we come together into a church darkened like the tomb. We will bless a new fire, light the Paschal candle and pass its light to smaller candles as we sing, "The light of Christ; thanks be to God" and then honor that light in the chanting of the Exhultet. We will read formational stories to each other and bring a new Christian into the

fold. We will have completed one more cycle from ashes to fire. We will celebrate the Risen Christ with our whole hearts.

In the weeks in between, we prepare by searching our hearts so that God can cleanse and purify them, and we pray that God will make our hearts whole. Episcopal writer, Nora Gallagher, has proposed that “the essence of healing, perhaps the essence of what we mean by resurrection, is to take the chaotic and traumatic events of our lives and rewrite them into a new story, a new life. When I ponder the resurrected Jesus,” she writes, “what I think about now is how out of the chaos and trauma of death, new life was written and revealed. Before a new story can be rewritten, the old one needs to be examined.¹”

Everything that we are doing this evening is preparation: smudging our foreheads, kneeling to pray uncomfortable words of penitence—admitting our deafness to God, our unfaithfulness, our self-indulgence and negligence. Then we will leave in silence, foregoing the comfort of reassuring conversation. Everything that we are doing tonight is intended to help us know our hearts in all their light and shadow—to know our hearts as God already knows and *loves* them. Our hearts—and the deepest recesses within them—contain nothing new to God. But bringing ourselves deeper into relationship with the unrelenting love of God requires us *first* to have the courage to look and then to take on practices that purify.

In our Gospel this evening, Matthew mentions three spiritual practices that inspire our courage, and that open us to God’s cleansing and healing. These three practices are: almsgiving, fasting and prayer.

¹ Nora Gallagher. “*Things Seen and Unseen: A Year Lived in Faith.*” New York: A.A. Knopf, 1998.

Almsgiving goes beyond writing a check or giving a couple of dollars to someone with a cardboard sign, not that those are wrong. It's that almsgiving *as a Lenten practice* has more to do with cultivating the habit of releasing our attachments to whatever resources have come our way and sharing what we have with others. *Choosing* to give something of yourself for another person or people with no thought of payback or how deserving you think the other is.

Fasting goes beyond giving up chocolate or wine or cigars. Fasting as a Lenten practice is *also* about releasing attachments. Most of us live with overbooked schedules, which means that the only way to truly give of yourself for another is to let something else drop away for a few weeks. Fasting is about noticing the appetites and habits that draw our energy without our permission, like unauthorized co-signers on our emotional, physical and spiritual savings accounts. Fasting is about leaning into the liberation that God has made possible so that we *choose* our reactions to other people's acts and words instead of knee-jerking in anger or upset; separating ourselves from our habitual patterns of behavior so that we are open to a wider range of choices.

Prayer. Genuine almsgiving and fasting are nearly impossible without prayer. Prayer is more than just talking to God. Prayer is relationship, and Lent is an excellent time to practice listening to God or to listening to those things that are *of* God. Listening to God speaking the language of silence. Reading a spiritually nourishing book slowly, no more than 20 minutes a day, not for the purpose of gathering information or for academic learning, but wasting time with God in the trust that God may find a way to use your reading to speak to your heart.

Almsgiving, fasting, prayer—three interrelated practices for observing a Holy Lent. Three heart-searching practices that allow God to cleanse and purify our hearts and make them whole. With these practices, we consent for God to help us

become most deeply who God created us to be—God’s own treasures, treasures that have one precious lifetime to leave legacies of love, justice and peace behind us. From the ashes of all our previous efforts, God brings us another opportunity this evening to begin creating a new story set ablaze with God’s Paschal love.

Episcopalian poet, Mary Oliver, contemplates death as a motivation for making our life stories burn with Holy Fire in her poem called, *When Death Comes*.

“When death comes
like the hungry bear in autumn
when death comes and takes all the bright coins from his purse
to buy me, and snaps his purse shut;
when death comes
like the measles pox;
when death comes
like an iceberg between the shoulder blades,
I want to step through the door full of curiosity, wondering;
what is it going to be like, that cottage of darkness?
And therefore I look upon everything
as a brotherhood and a sisterhood,
and I look upon time as no more than an idea,
and I consider eternity as another possibility,
and I think of each life as a flower, as common
as a field daisy, and as singular,
and each name a comfortable music in the mouth
tending as all music does, toward silence,
and each body a lion of courage, and something
precious to the earth.
When it's over, I want to say: all my life
I was a bride married to amazement.
I was a bridegroom, taking the world into my arms.
When it's over, I don't want to wonder
if I have made of my life something particular, and real.
I don't want to find myself sighing and frightened
or full of argument.
I don't want to end up simply having visited this world.”²

² Mary Oliver. *New and Selected Poems*. Boston: Beacon Press, 2004.