

“What are you giving up for Lent?” Anyone asked you that yet? “What are you giving up for Lent?” Strict Roman Catholics give up eating meat during Lent, and many Orthodox also give up eggs, fish, fowl and even animal milk. Some Protestants and more than a few Episcopalians give up chocolate or wine. Or pizza. Or binge-watching “Game of Thrones.” Some may find the variety of Christian fasting a little quaint. And that’s fine.

Because what is more essential is what we have in common with people who observe Lent; and we do “observe” Lent, don’t we? Unlike the seasons of Easter, Advent or Christmas, Episcopalians don’t *celebrate* Lent – we *observe* it. And abstaining from some food or habit for the season can truly be a meaningful part of our observance. What is far more crucial is the motivation for our observance.

What we share with all kinds of Christians transcends the differences in our church traditions. What we have in common transcends the personal choices we make for our self-denial, our personal spiritual growth or our moves to simplify our lives. What observers of Lent have in common is captured in a phrase that will be repeated on this holy night millions of times, in dozens of languages, by people of every ethnicity, to people of every age.

Clergy all over the world have said or will say this evening some version of this: "Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return." And then they will trace the sign of the cross in ashes on the soft, smooth foreheads of babies and children, on the apprehensive foreheads of people new to their faith and on aging foreheads of people who have earned every wrinkle. For some, this will be the first Ash Wednesday liturgy they have ever experienced and for others, this will be the last.

In this liturgy, we intentionally bring the connection between baptism and burial – between life and death – into sharp focus. In a moment, I will trace an ashen cross on your foreheads in the same pattern that was traced on each of our foreheads at baptism, when a priest or a bishop marked us with holy oil—sealed us as Christ’s own forever – at the beginning of our life as a Christian.

And as I trace the shape of that cross, I will say the phrase that is repeated in our burial ritual. Pondering the prospect of death does not come easily to most 21<sup>st</sup> c. Americans. I remember a surgeon once telling me that he blamed the insane costs of healthcare in America on the fact that we

think of death as an option, not as a natural transition. And if death is an option instead of a certainty, who wouldn't go into Lent giving up double cheeseburgers instead of thinking about dying for five weeks?

But death is *not* an option. Death is a transition, much like birth. Our grandmothers and grandfathers in the faith knew that far better than we seem to.

St. Benedict wrote his Rule for monastic communities in the sixth century and it is still a compelling guide for anyone hoping to live out the Gospel. In the chapter called "What are the tools of good works?" Benedict advises that we "keep death suspect before your eyes." The daily suspicion is not whether you *might* die, but *when*. That death might come today. Or tomorrow. That's why some Benedictine monasteries always keep an open grave in their cemeteries. Death should never take a Benedictine entirely by surprise.

The purpose is not a morbid fixation on death, but a trust that if we practice understanding that death will eventually come for us, possibly even today, we might decide to live, more fully alive and clear about what matters in the one amazing and turbulent life God has given us.

Br. David, a friend of mine who has been living the Rule of St. Benedict for more than six decades, explains the Lenten opportunity to get in touch with death like this: "The finality of death is meant to challenge us to decision, the decision to be fully present here now, and so begin eternal life. For eternity rightly understood is not the perpetuation of time, on and on, but rather the overcoming of time by the now that does not pass away." What remembrance of death is meant to do, Br. David says, is to challenge us into choosing life; to *decide* to become fully alive.

And so, in remembrance, we mark our foreheads with ashes made from burned palm fronds from last year's Palm Sunday. We walk through Lent with Christ marked by the scorched remains of a previous walk. Suspicious of the timing of our mortality, we practice death before it comes.

The dust and ashes accompany us not into paralysis, but into action – actions that turn us daily to Christ, setting aside distractions to restore our relationship with Christ, clearing away the noise that overwhelms the still, silent voice of God speaking in our hearts even now.

"Whenever you pray," we hear Jesus say, "go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret." The English translation

loses something essential, made all the more important as we step into Lent this evening.

We may hear “go into your room” as a reference to our bedroom or some other room where we live, but Matthew’s Greek is more specific: “When you pray, go into your *storeroom* and *lock* the door and pray to your Father, the one hidden there.” The Greek word implies an inner room where, in a temple, money and other valuable objects were among the things kept there and guarded.

Benedictines accept the proposal in this reading that God is already hidden in that storeroom – hidden in the human heart. Contemplative prayer is based on the trust that to go into one’s heart in silence and stillness is to go into God’s loving presence in a place where we have stored everything that we have found valuable, some of which is life-giving and some of which is dead or dying.

When Jesus cautions us to “store up treasures in heaven,” he is unlocking that storeroom and turning on the light. He invites us to see for ourselves what we are keeping there. Surely, love and devotion must be blossoming there or we wouldn’t be here, but we may also see that we are storing up all the times other people have slighted us. In addition to all the building up of others that we do, we may also discover that we have been taking unkind digs at someone or some group. Maybe we have given too much space to our own accomplishments or maybe we have allowed far too little. We will surely find gratitude, joy and awe, but we may also be storing up rage or resentment.

Lent, you see, can be more than giving up cigars for a while. Lent is God’s invitation to take fearless inventory of *whatever* it is that we are storing up in our hearts. Whatever is there, God already sees. For some, Lent is a time to notice the sincerity, the sacrifices, the love that is there within us. God sees them. Most of us do well to get in touch with the bitterness, the resentment, the hostility that we are storing and are, perhaps unwittingly, allowing to become precious to us. God has already seen it all.

Fortunately, the God hidden in our hearts brings new life out of death. With God’s help, to get in touch with death is to get more deeply in touch with life. As the ash is traced over the same permanent mark made during our baptisms, we can decide to become more transparent to ourselves and to God about who we truly are, how we truly want to show up in the world and what we would like to leave behind so that we can be that person.

We trust God to help knowing that God yearns for our spiritual, relational and communal renewal. "...on Ash Wednesday," Theologian Karl Rahner once wrote, "when we hear the words, 'Remember, you are dust,' we are also told that we are brothers and sisters of the incarnate Lord. In these words we are told everything that we are: nothingness that is filled with eternity; death that teems with life; futility that redeems; dust that is God's life forever."

So. Now...what are you giving up for Lent?

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Works consulted:

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