

03/09/2014 – First Sunday of Lent

“Temptation to Not Be”

This is the first Sunday of Lent. We often speak of this time as a journey to the Cross, but I want to suggest this year, we simply let Lent be what it is, a time of repentance, prayer and inward reflection on who we are and whose we are.

The story from Genesis talks about why we are tempted to look to the past, and our reading from Matthew has Satan speaking to how much better things will be in the future if only Christ would swear allegiance to him. By looking forward to how it should or could be, and looking backward to how we think it was or how we wanted it to be, we miss the presence of God in the present.

We do the same thing to Lent. All the things we do for Lent are often intended to gain something spiritual. Lent doesn't stand for itself in the Christian year, but instead is presented as a lead-in to Easter. We do something because it leads to something. Dietrich Bonhoeffer called this approach to spirituality, “Spiritual Materialism”. Christian spirituality, he said, is most effective when we see the practices of the faith as outcomes and ends rather than means to ends.

That is not to say Lent can't be what it has been; it most certainly can and should be a preparation for Easter. But we must seek to avoid the temptation to not be present with God and with ourselves during this time, as if Lent were a time of preparation to see a God who has only been present in the past or will be in the future.

Lent, which is an Anglo-Saxon word for “spring”, has been practiced in one form or another since the earliest days of Christianity. The most common focus was on one's baptism and its meaning, and repentance as a response in gratitude for the gift of baptism. This was done through fasting, prayer, Scripture reading and self-sacrifice through good works. As the tradition grew, the focus became more on the acts as preparation for Easter and perhaps one's baptism on Easter morning.

The events of one's faith life are sometimes seen as goals to attain, but really they are markers which define the contours of our spiritual lives. The acts and practices are ends in themselves and rather than leading to an outcome, are instead acts which mark our relationship with a God who is always present with us. Lent, then, is a time where we recognize the grace of God present in our lives right now.

Lent calls us to repentance and self-reflection. What if repentance and self-reflection are in and of themselves what God calls us to so we might constantly be aware of the presence of God? Repentance and self-reflection *are* the practices which God has given us to be in the presence of God. When they are used as tools and means to find God, we are no longer present. Instead, we are looking backward to some time when we used to present with God, or forward to when we will be. If only I can fix this thing for which I am repenting, *then* I can be with God. If only I do this particular practice, *then* God will lower God's self to be present for me.

But this is not true. God is always present and we come to know more deeply God's presence right now by repenting of looking forward and backward, instead of using our self-reflection and repentance as a kind of magic key to get God to come to us.

Lent calls us to prayer and intentionality. These also are practices that God has given us to be present with God *right now*. We think often of prayer as leading to something. We ask of God and then we receive from God. We are intentional about our faith lives so God might pay more attention to us. But perhaps prayer isn't really about asking for things at all. Perhaps prayer is simply how we are in deep conversation with the Ever-present Lord. What if, and I am just offering it as a suggestion, prayer doesn't lead to anything at all? What if prayer is our simple way of having a conversation with the one who made us and is forming us right now? That is its only purpose. An intentional faith life is itself a gift of God who wishes us to simply be in the presence of God always.

Lent calls us to Scripture and silence. We want Scripture to tell us what to do and how to live,

but perhaps Scripture is simply the story of God's presence with God's people. We are continuing that story and Scripture stands simply as the testament of that story and history. What if, like prayer, Scripture doesn't lead to anything at all, but simply deepens our relationship with God and helps us recognize God's presence with us right now?

Silence is perhaps the most difficult aspect of Lent. Jesus spends 40 days in silence in the desert. He only speaks when Satan tempts him. We get uncomfortable in silence. We want to *do something*. But silence also is a gift from God so we might be the presence of God for others. Or more likely, we are silent so all of us might begin to listen for God's presence in the conversation and situation with which we are struggling.

So during Lent, we practice all these acts of faith – repentance, self-reflection, prayer and intentional faith, Scripture and silence – in order to live more deeply into God's presence now. We are tempted to go to the past, like Adam and Eve looking longingly back at the Garden that is now out of their reach. And we are tempted to go to the future, where all our food will be provided for, where we can defy the laws of body and materiality and where we can finally be the king or queen of our particular domain. But the costs to looking backward are very high, and the costs of giving ourselves over to the future alone are even higher. One costs our innocence; the other costs our souls.

But right now, at the beginning of Lent, we are already, even now, in the shadow of God's grace. The sins of the past, which affect all of us, are overcome by the gift of grace by the work of Christ, which is present for all time because of the Cross and the Resurrection. So when we repent, let us repent of our lack of recognition of God's present grace. And when we self-reflect, let us reflect on why we might not want to experience the presence of God. And when we pray, let us have a conversation with the very present God rather than simply ask for things into an unknown future. And let us be intentional not for any outcome but to be in the simple presence of God and one another right now. And when we read Scripture, let us read it as a testament to the faith of our ancestors and us, as a gift of grace given for right now, completed, yet living. And in silence, let us welcome the presence of God in our circumstances, our relationships, our church and our community, and within ourselves. Let us enter Lent and avoid the temptation to long for the past or create the future, and instead simply *be* with God and one another.

Amen.