

February 25, 2009

Ash Wednesday

All Saints' Episcopal Church, Atlanta, Ga.

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Probably priests aren't supposed to admit this, but I don't really look forward to Lent. I live simply, so the thought of trying to give something up or lash myself to a discipline always stresses me out more than it does the work of self-examination or bringing me closer to God.

This is my job, I should be good at this, but even that admittance only makes it harder for me to get my mind around, as if my Lenten discipline should be just that much more meaningful, as if leading by example means I have all the answers.

The truth is, friends, I don't. I dread Lent and I struggle with it every year. This year it has been particularly hard for me to wrap my mind around six weeks of the solemn work of Lent, the dirge-y-ness of it and the internal self-flagellation that it seems to bring upon me.

I wasn't really sure why this year's dread was so much greater until Elizabeth pointed out that we have been living Lent already. We have been stuck in months of a secular, cultural Lent-like time. If you are, like I am, prone to see Lent as a time of doom and sorrow, of asceticism and bad news, well, friends, we're already there. And we've been there for some time now. No wonder Lent feels so extra dreadful this year.

It doesn't seem like we need reminding that we are lowly and mortal. Most of us are already giving up things right and left, making hard decisions about what stays and what goes. We are tightening our belts and cutting back. Few households are untouched by this Lent-like pall on the country and the world. We have certainly felt the strain of it here among the staff and in our conversations with many of you.

What then, are we to be disciplined about during the *sacred* time of Lent this year? We certainly aren't looking for new ways to deny ourselves those things that bring us joy and comfort. How can we dust ourselves off and observe Lent in a good and holy way?

Since we are daily being reminded that our society is judging our worth by our shrinking bank accounts, waning pension, disappearing jobs and what have you,

what if we continue on the idea of Lent as a gift, not for asceticism, denial, pain, but for remembrance. Perhaps we can use the next forty days as a reminder in the midst of this financial crisis that our lives, our belovedness is not related to those things that we seem to be losing by the day.

The truth is, Lent is not now and has never been about reducing our self-worth. Lent is, instead, about clearing out those things that stand in the way of our remembering that we are not God but that we are indeed beloved of God.

When we see that our work this Lent is to let God in to go to work in our lives, to mold us and heal us, we are in essence living the words of the Psalm we will pray in a few moments: "Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me."

When the outside is stripped away, when there is nothing earthly left to give up, when we are laid bare by our circumstance rather than our choices and self-examination is the only thing we have left, that is when we can look closely and see ourselves as beloved. That, too, is Lent, it is the work we do to help us remember WHO WE ARE.

We are not bank accounts.
We are not mortgages.
We are not interest rates.
We are not things or stuff or junk.
WE ARE BELOVED.

When we do the hard work that it takes to remind ourselves that we are, each of us, invaluable in the eyes of a creator that loves us, not our net worth, that is the work of Lent. And friends, don't misunderstand me, in times like these, when every other force on the planet wants you to believe differently, THIS IS HARD WORK.

That is when we are really creating the space in our lives to let God in. That is when, in our small and insignificant human way, we can acknowledge that God deserves a place among all of the things we usually use to distract ourselves from that which is of ultimate worth. This is our way of getting rid of those things that replace God in our affections, the things that lay an artificial, ineffectual balm on our very real wounds.

Our opportunity this Lent is, in the midst of a world that would like us to believe we are cheap, replaceable and used up, we must learn to believe that we are worthy, good and holy. Our opportunity this Lent is to reject a world that would prefer us to say yes to that which is expensive, temporary and scarce, instead saying YES to the free, eternal and abundant love of God.

This is your invitation to a holy Lent.