

Today we begin a pilgrimage together.

Fasting. Giving up some things, Taking on some new ones.

Lent can be a pilgrimage.

Many of us have been on pilgrimage on our own or with the Church. Many of you went on pilgrimage to the Holy Land with our rector. I have led six youth pilgrimages and am going on one of my own with the Diocese to Ghana late next month. One of the practices we commend to our pilgrims, out of Phil Cousineau's book, "The Art of Pilgrimage," has to do with *packing*. Pilgrims are supposed to consider carefully what we are packing in our bags, then finish packing, close up our bags, and sit on them for half an hour. We will then think through all of the things that we put in our bag. Pilgrims who do this always come up with two or three things to leave behind. Usually they are items we felt compelled to carry because we thought they defined us. Youth Pilgrims will say that they will realize they didn't need their iPhone or that camera we asked them not to bring or that book they had to read for school... or that stylish outfit that they would wear on our free night to impress the girl or boy they had their eye on.

Some even have said that leaving behind some things helped them feel closer to God and have a truer and deeper pilgrimage.

So, when we began our Lenten pilgrimage today with the tradition of fasting from something we like, we might have missed that cup of coffee, or that glass of beer or that session of Netflix binging, and maybe even found ourselves choosing different words if we gave up cursing for Lent. Yet, all of us do have a hunch that our fasting sort of a game we play with ourselves, isn't it? Religious and irreligious alike will ask, "What are you giving up for Lent?"

“Oh I am giving up chocolate”

Or “I am giving up giving up things” someone always says.

In our fasts, though, we have are pointed towards something much deeper.

Jesus points us deeper. He gives us a bad example, to start.

The hypocrites hadn't a clue about a deeper kind of repentance. They smeared themselves with ashes, tore their clothes and prayed loudly to show off. They were rewarded because people saw them. Their desire was to be seen as repentant rather than to *be truly* repentant. They got that reward. Jesus is points out their falsehood, their lie. So, Jesus urges his followers to pray in private to God because praying in private we are ourselves in front of God and not just the best version of ourselves.

Kind of strange, that the Gospel tells us *not* to do what we are about to do- *not* to wear our ashes in public. Yet, with this we are given the experience of the hypocrites- of *being seen* when that person at the Grocery Store or on the train or at the office sees us and thinks “Oh... well... *they* went to church...”

The ashes still invite us deeper. We learn and experience the bad example of the hypocrites even as we are invited to deeper repentance. So later, when we wipe those ashes off we can be reminded of the *pilgrimage* we are called to during Lent, the ashes become an invitation. They become an invitation to look at the *real* things we carry- the real things that we need to leave behind for our *life's* pilgrimage. Our:

Self-hatred, our guilt, grudges we hold, fears we harbor, the racism nested in our hearts, sexism or homophobia resident in our souls, anger we carry and maybe even very real addictions to substances or even feelings like a need to control, fear, anxiety and maybe even depression.

Repentance in this light means something drastically different from what the hypocrites experienced. Repentance in this regard means changing directions, trying something else in our lives, because these things that we carry just don't work. Repentance means leaving behind that which separates us from God and from one another and forces us to push that *best version of ourselves* to the surface- our *false self*.

Monk and Writer Thomas Merton describes conversion as a process of leaving behind our false selves and living into who God created us to be. He says that everyone is shadowed by this "illusory person", a "false self" "we want ourselves to be but is a person who does not exist, because then God does not know anything about us because it is a self who wants "privacy from God."

Our false self-parades religiosity because it does not want to go in private and confess to God. A false self shows off holiness in public because in private it despairs the separation it feels. A false self avoids conversation with God because it does not trust that God and loves and forgives. A false self stops with the outward and trivial during Lent and avoids the real work of figuring the deeper things it carries and needs to leave behind for life's pilgrimage.

What is it we need to leave behind? What is it we carry that we do not need? How do we spend energy convincing people we are good and making ourselves look holy because inside we know that we are not, because in private with God we avoid revealing the heaviness in our hearts?

So, we begin this Holy Pilgrimage, and we will walk on, carrying some, and leaving some burdens behind, but we will walk on together. Our hope for Holy Lent is that we can leave some of them behind, but we will walk on together during this pilgrimage.

I leave you with a bit of poetry- from my favorite Episcopalian- Bono.

A song called "Walk On":

Leave it behind - You've got to leave it behind -All that you fashion

All that you make -All that you build- All that you break- All that you measure- All that you steal

-All this you can leave behindAll that you reason- All that you care- All that you sense- All that you speak- All you dress up...And all that you scheme...all you create all you wreck all that you hate, walk on.. walk on...

We are invited to walk on- into our Lenten pilgrimage, leaving behind the weight of our false selves, the baggage of our sins, our burdens.. walk on.