

Ash Wednesday Homily
Isaiah 58:1-12 and Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

Rev. Sharon A. Benton
Feb. 9, 2005

Ash Wednesday. Lent. Seasons of the church year. Rituals which meaning seems to get lost – or at least hidden – by yearly repetition. Do we give up chocolate for these next 40 days (plus Sundays)? Or all caffeine? What's the point? Ancient as the church, the ashes of penitence can be newly interpreted and reclaimed by each generation of seekers.

We have spent the season of Epiphany – this time since Christmas – witnessing God revealed in the world. We've been spectators of the birth, of miracles and messages like, "you are my beloved."

But today we begin a journey with Jesus through temptation and teachings and hard counsel. For us as for the disciples, it is a time of questioning our commitment to this man who calls us. It's a time of recognizing his story as our own. *And perhaps hardest of all, it's a time of acknowledging OUR PART in creating and sustaining our world's pain.* Thus the Lectionary's given texts for tonight.

And yet, don't these passages seem redundant for a congregation like Plymouth? Justice and outreach is the name of the game here, so aren't Isaiah's accusations unnecessary? // And, well really, if any of us ever fasts, we sure don't let anyone else know about it. Thanks for the advice anyway, Matthew.

Ours is a congregation that takes seriously the Biblical call to be good stewards of our world and good neighbors to all humanity. The prophet's reminder -
"Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke?" – *this* is a type of fast we can handle. We understand its purpose, its usefulness - its *necessity*.

Lent is when we hear again the stories of Jesus' ministry and engagement with his community. Jesus has appeared and, with Isaiah in the background of it all, shown us the way to *be* with our friends and enemies, with our communities and with ourselves. Through his life and this season, we have another opportunity to consider OUR PART in God's plan for humanity and all of Creation.

And we do, *absolutely* strive to live out justice and not act simply for the notice or approval of others.

But within this evening's scripture passages there is another mandate. In Isaiah, the people are wondering why their honoring of God through spiritual practices is going unnoticed. The reply is that devotions have no depth when social practices don't flow out from them. Matthew's text moves in an apparently opposite direction: practices of social and self care – like monetary giving, prayer and fasting – mean nothing when they are only for show. It is only by being centered in the holy that these practices achieve meaning. All should begin in God – and the rest follows.

Where does that place us? Because we live it so strongly, must we let go of our dedication to this community and to the world? Of course not – Jesus' life and teachings demand such commitment. But neither can we reject fasting and prayer, ritual and practice. Rather, each of these is a part of the whole in holy living – outward giving and inward care balance and feed each other.

It is Lent, and our eyes are NOT YET set on Easter. If the whole story were contained in just Jesus' birth and God's presence – in Christmas and Epiphany – an then Resurrection joy....when would we have opportunity to embrace OUR PART in God's plan of salvation?

Our part is the justice-making and the prayer. It is the selfless giving and the daily rededication of our spiritual selves. Rather than (or perhaps in addition to) the traditional “giving something up” for Lent, perhaps we might try “taking something on” in the devotional realm. As Hal mentioned on Sunday, there are a number of opportunities for us to center in the Spirit this season. So consider attending the Praying with Stories offering, or the Taize service, or the regular Contemplative Prayer. Consider the possibility of taking on a weekly fast, and studying the spiritual purpose of that discipline. Or meditating with the Lenten Prayer Booklet lovingly prepared by our own members. Spiritual ritual and remembering ourselves – this is the purpose of the ashes.

Like the hearers of Matthew and Isaiah, we must watch out for getting stuck in one way of being. We must recognize that our prayers, our fasting, our time with God make a difference in this world as well as our speaking and acting outward.

Very soon, Christ will rise and be glorified once more in our yearly celebration. But for now, it is our time to look to ourselves, to take responsibility for what is to come, and to know that we are given the ability to travel this road with the One who has called us to follow in justice and mercy and humility – as well as in prayer and devotion.

This is not new news, it is Good News! And may we carry it throughout this season. Amen.