

A TRINITARIAN APPROACH TO LENT

MATTHEW 6:1-6, 16-21

Now is a time to plant, repent and prepare. God created us from the dust of the earth, and to this dust we will return. Ashes to ashes, and dust to dust: God created light and darkness and deemed this creation “good,” but our ancestors were disobedient, and God sends Jesus into the world not to condemn the world, but that the world may be saved through him. God prepares Jesus for this journey through baptism. The Spirit leads him into and out of temptation, and yet Jesus perseveres. He perseveres in the face of adversity, healing the sick, binding up the broken-hearted and proclaiming release to the captives, which includes you and me, because each and every one of us gives away our freedom to someone or something. The Spirit strives to liberate us from this bondage by reminding us that Jesus is with us, that Christ has come and that Christ will come again. On the other side of Lent is the joy of Easter, joy that is celebrated only after passing through the events of Holy Week, through bread that is broken and wine that is poured, through betrayal in a garden and crucifixion on a hill. God created this darkness, and God created the light, and in the beginning, God deemed them “good.”

Again and again, the Scriptures and our tradition refer to darkness as “good.” In the beginning, it is not just the light but also the darkness that God deems “good” suggesting that there is something intrinsically valuable and deeply spiritual about self-examination, sorrow and grief. The church remembers the Friday on which Christ was crucified as “good.” Good Friday may be good for us, but it was not good for Jesus or his mother. Self-examination, sorrow and grief are places through which the Spirit leads us, emphasis on “through.” God does not intend for us to abide there, only to pass through.

Now here is what I am obligated to say to you in this service and on this night: there is darkness inside each of us, and we will travel through darkness in our lifetimes, darkness that leads ultimately to death. Lent is a call to recognize this and to think seriously and pray fervently about what will take place

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Ash Wednesday, Year C, February 17, 2009*

between now and then. What we plant tonight will be harvested and given to God during Easter. What we plant tonight will have to be cultivated by self-discipline and the Spirit's work among us (and not necessarily in that order). The sin that we confess tonight will require pruning throughout this Lenten fast. How we prepare for Easter will affect how God is glorified in this place this Easter.

How are you approaching Lent this year? What have you done in the past? Has there ever been a year when you did not do whatever it was that you set out to do? Give Lydia credit for the last question. Last night, she and I were discussing the subject of Lent, and she asked me if I ever did not make it.

I would answer that question for you here, but Matthew's Gospel exhorts us not to practice our piety (and presumably a lack thereof) before others in order to be seen by them. Give, but silence the trumpet. Do not let your right hand know what your left hand is doing (which may be easiest part of this passage for me, because I often find myself changing gears more often and too quickly than I ever thought that I would or care to admit). Pray, but not in public, not in the synagogue or on the street corner, at least not to be seen by others. Be sure to understand the difference between self-discipline and celebrity.

What I find ironic about the Lectionary readings for Ash Wednesday is that Matthew's is the Gospel reading in a service that includes an invitation to observe a Lenten discipline. Observe Lent, but do not say anything to anyone about it. When you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that your fasting may be seen not by others but by the God whose Spirit is with you throughout these forty days. What is a congregation to do? Worship in the dark, and give complimentary baths after the service so the ashes on our heads will not call attention to our piety. Actually, these are not bad ideas.

So how will you observe Lent? What are you going to plant? Of what are you going to repent? How will you prepare? Without a doubt, the one that I have known parishioners to practice more than

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any others is “no chocolate.” For me personally, the toughest one ever was to give up caffeine. No, the experience was not the same as being crucified for the forgiveness of sins, but the practice did encourage me to cultivate something that Buddhists refer to as “right mindfulness.”

But my approach to Lent is changing. I am thinking more and more in Trinitarian terms, and Trinitarian, at least as I am thinking about Lenten observance this year, has more than one meaning. The first is traditional. God created the world. God created me. God gave me gifts to use for God’s glory, and cultivating these gifts is part of my Lenten devotion. The gifts that God gives to us should keep on giving through the development of them. In Jesus Christ, I am redeemed from a past that cannot be changed and from a future that I sometimes fear. I am part of Christ’s body, which was beaten and broken on Good Friday, and was resurrected on Easter. You and I will feel beaten and broken at times, and through the observance of Lenten disciplines, the Spirit of God equips us to persevere. This same Spirit abides with us, reminding us that in life and in death, we belong to God; and that if we live, we live in the Lord, and if we die, we die in Christ.

The second approach is Trinitarian in as much as it comes in three parts: mind, body and spirit. I have decided that one discipline is not enough unless it encompasses all three. Jesus’ summary of the Law in Matthew’s Gospel is, “‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ And a second is like it: ‘You shall love the Lord your neighbor as yourself.’” There is much, much more to life in Christ than dogmatic defenses of orthodoxy. There is much, much more to serving an incarnate God than insisting that the body that God has given us is somehow not worthy of being loved. A broken and contrite spirit, God does not despise. God loves us. God loves our neighbors, and our capacity for loving others deepens with our ability to love ourselves.

Mind. Body. Spirit. How are you glorifying God with your mind? What Lenten discipline would open your mind in service to God? With what questions are you grappling? Is there a book to read

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through which the Spirit of God may form and reform you spiritually? Are your mind and body places in which truth reside? How are you honoring God with your body? Is there something to give up? Is it time to let go? Is there something different, something healthy, something energizing and animating to do that you are not doing now. Now is the time.

How will you do justice, love kindness and walk humbly this Lent? At the heart of the Gospel is grace, grace that we cannot earn and do not deserve. So when you are out there doing justice and loving kindness, remember to walk humbly, for humility is on the other end of the continuum of practicing your piety in public, and this humility will serve you well when you face adversity. It will serve you well in the face of death. Soon, Jesus Christ will set his face for Jerusalem. There he will suffer and die, but suffering and death will not have the final word. God will, and the God who brings us together to worship this Lent is alive and well and will lead us through the darkness, out of which something amazing as God's grace in Jesus Christ will come. To the God of all grace, who calls you to share God's eternal glory in union with Christ, be the power forever! Amen.

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