

“Lent - The Most Wonderful Time of the Year”

ASH WEDNESDAY

2015

2 Corinthians 5:20-6:2

This is the day the Lord has made. Let us rejoice and be glad in it. AMEN. The text for our message in the Epistle lesson which was read earlier.

A church newsletter came to our house the other day with the lead article entitled, “Lent – The Most Wonderful Time of the Year” Frankly, I was shocked. Throughout my years as a Lutheran teacher and pastor I have had countless people ask me, “WHY DO WE HAVE LENT? Are we really supposed to say, O good, here come 40 days to feel miserable and guilty.” It never stopped with that but always led to, “It’s cold, snowy and dark. I don’t want to go out to another service. We bury the Alleluia so there’s not a joyful song to be sung.”

Even typing those words I realized how whiny they sound – and turning from whining to fix our eyes upon Jesus – well, that’s reason enough for Lent, but it is part of a much bigger picture in the church. 40 days and nights of rain for the world to be cleansed from the evil of humanity in the Flood, 40 days that Jesus spent in the wilderness enduring the worst temptations Satan could throw at Him, a mirror of the 40 days after Easter that Jesus spent with the disciples – 40 days to get ready – well, Rowan Williams, former Archbishop of Canterbury summed it up:

Lent is not about feeling gloomy for forty days...it is about preparing for that great climax which is Easter – new life bursting through death. And as we prepare ourselves for Easter during these days, by prayer and self-denial, what motivates and what fills the horizon is not self-denial as an end in itself, but trying to sweep and clean the room of our own minds and hearts so that the new life rally may have room to come in and take over and transform us at Easter.

Lent is our time to fix our eyes upon Jesus who endured the cross for you and me. Lent is our time to consider Jesus, the author and finisher of the faith that has been given to us as a free gift – and to consider the price of the gift that comes to us so freely, the grace that is poured out on us lavishly, the grace in which we

stand. It is time for us to remember and realize that because of Jesus we can always, “return to the Lord our God who is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love.”

Lent is our time to consider what it means to be called to walk with Jesus not only as the Lenten days lengthen toward Easter and that earth shattering eternity changing event is celebrated once again but to remember that all the days are lengthening – all of time is coming closer to the new birth of the universe, the return of Jesus, the beginning of eternity.

If we are honest with ourselves as we enter Lent it isn't 40 days of the absence of Alleluias that makes us whine, it is the reluctance to consider what it really means to fix our eyes upon Jesus. We are afraid that if we fix our eyes upon Jesus – consider His sacrifice for us, desire to amend our sinful lives and live our lives more fully in Him that it will “cramp our style.” Paul tells us, however, that “now is the day of our salvation – now is the acceptable time.” “(God) made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.” Now is our time to be “ambassadors for Christ.” Now “God is making his appeal through us to others “on behalf of Christ, (so that they might) be reconciled to God.”

This living out of the faith is done each day of our lives as baptized believers – remembering that washing, that cleansing, that gift. Remembering that while we are dust and to dust we shall return that we have been claimed for eternity by God who “has redeemed us, lost and condemned creatures, purchased and won us, not by gold or silver but by His holy precious blood and His innocent suffering and death.”

Now the Jews believed that you lived out this life of faith by observing the three pillars of the faith: giving to the poor, fasting, and praying. While it is easy to point out that they had made a mockery of all of these: letting their gifts to the

poor clank loudly when they put them in the offering pipe (shaped like a long horn and made out of metal that resounded when you put in a tiny or a big coin), fasting so that all could see their faces were drawn and sad and they were starving themselves for God, and praying loudly and publicly – what is most important for us to remember is that all of these are things that Jesus did. Jesus gave to the poor – gave them dignity and healing, ate with them, talked to them, listened to them – called them friends. Jesus fasted. Jesus prayed – conversed with His heavenly Father early in the morning, through the night, praying so fervently in Gethsemane that He sweat blood.

Our lives are to be marked by these pillars of the faith – Lent is a reminder of that – but not in an outward and showy way. Not as hypocrites – which is the Greek word for “actor.” So why the imposition of ashes? It is an outward sign to the world telling them to whom we belong. We belong to Jesus. This ashen cross is an outward sign of our inward renewal through the baptism that also found us marked with the cross on the forehead and on our hearts as one redeemed by Christ the crucified. May God grant each of us this Lent and throughout our lives the grace to be witnesses, ambassadors for Christ, to wear our faith for others to see all to the glory of our God who has redeemed us, who is gracious and merciful, abounding in steadfast love. May this, indeed, be a most wonderful time of the year as we walk in repentance, forgiveness and a renewed knowledge of just how much we are loved by God!

AMEN