

A Homily Delivered by
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Saint Peter's Episcopal Church
Glenside, Pennsylvania

Ash Wednesday
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(Propers-Ash Wednesday Year B)

Create and make in us new and contrite hearts, that we, worthily lamenting our sins and acknowledging our wretchedness, may obtain of you, the god of all mercy, perfect remission and forgiveness; through Jesus Christ our Lord.

I have said several times the purpose of a sermon or homily on any occasion, and the task of the preacher, is to proclaim the good news. I will try to do that this evening as we celebrate, assuming that is the right word, our Ash Wednesday liturgy. I hesitate to use the word "celebrate" because Lent is considered a penitential season, and it seems a bit unseemly to incorporate this designated season in the church calendar which has been set aside for prayer and fasting, as an occasion for festivity or joy. We are on the horns of a dilemma in this liturgy, especially since we are distributing ashes in the same service where we celebrate the Holy Eucharist. There is a keen sense of irony in all that we are doing tonight.

One of the most biting criticisms that is frequently leveled against the church, particularly in the use of the required Gospel lesson appointed for Ash Wednesday, is the phrase "whenever you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces so as to show others that they are fasting." No ambiguity here: it's very straightforward. Having said that, we then turn right around and smudge our foreheads with ashes in the sign of a cross that everyone can see from several feet away. Are we therefore modern day hypocrites like the scribes and Pharisees of old because of this? Well, to a certain degree "yes," and to a certain extent "no." It all depends upon one's point of view.

Another problem we face during this penitential season is how we flip the switch each Sunday and come out of our penitential mode and frame of mind, in order to enjoy the fellowship of the Eucharist as a feast occasion. Sunday as the first day of the week is a day the church recognizes as a feast day; that's true, and it sets the tone for the following week-days. During Lent however, we are to use the majority of our time in a mode of reflection where we seek to get in touch with the deeper questions of the meaning and purpose of life. The struggle is one of balancing prayer, reflection, fasting and penitential discipline alongside the joy of God's presence in the Eucharist with the concomitant benefits of Christian fellowship. No easy task. Checks and balances are in order.

So where do we go with this penitential season of forty days and forty nights? Several questions come to mind. How can we use the time most productively to discover a deeper sense of God's purposes in our lives? How can we use the traditional methods of Lent,

such as the collects, prayers, disciplines, fasting and so on, to help us achieve our fullest benefit of illumined reflection on the life of Christ? And perhaps most critical of all: how can we still keep on with our daily tasks of modern life that seem to drive us farther and farther away from the insights of faith, and which tend to make the whole point of a church season set apart with special services and liturgies completely irrelevant and totally disconnected to what's going on in today's world? When you stop to think about it, these are very disturbing questions.

Much as I would like to address these matters with ready answers, and in short order resolve these complex theological issues with conclusive and definitive clarity, it is not in my power to do so – and frankly it would be dishonest to even try, because I struggle with the confusion and perplexity of these penitential days as much as you do, or anyone else does for that matter.

Maybe this is the year to attempt something different. Instead of fighting the culture, and trying to take on a discipline that is so out of character for us that it is unnecessarily painful, perhaps this lent we should allow ourselves permission to “give it a rest.” What I'm suggesting is that the stakes are too high because they involve our personal well being, and we may need to go easier on ourselves, not harder. Forcing ourselves into something that is too much to handle is no virtue, and ultimately such an aggressive approach defeats the purpose of a reflective, penitential season like Lent.

As an alternative, I would recommend that since Lent comes relatively early this year, and we will no doubt race through the season so fast that we'll probably not even notice it, and more than likely arrive at Holy Week ill-prepared for the drama of Christ's death and resurrection; and given all that, we should put the whole season in respectful parentheses. By that I mean we should take our penitential acts seriously, yet not to the extent that they weigh us down. A lighter spirit during these dark days, especially with the economy in a tailspin, will be particularly welcome, and I encourage that kind of tempered approach.

At the same time services at church will continue pretty much as they always have, using the penitential order, focusing on the commandments of God, and emphasizing the rigorous disciplines that discipleship calls for. Note the root word here – *disciple*. But this time our focus lies ahead, and we can see the resurrection and renewal of life more clearly perhaps than we ever could before because of the hard times. That is what we will ground our faith upon this Lent, the hope of Christ.

As a Gradual, the hymn that we just sang from the 1982 Episcopal Hymnal, #665, is called – “All my hope on God is founded.” I would like to conclude tonight' homily by citing the second verse of that hymn because it speaks particularly to the theme of Lent. It goes:

*Mortal pride and earthly glory, sword and crown betray our trust:
Though with care and toil we build them, tower and temple fall to dust,
But God's power, hour by hour, is my temple and my tower.*

Let that hymn sing in your heart as this year's special Lenten praise.

In the Name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. AMEN