

Ash Wednesday 2019

It's all an act. Many of us stand around you looking as if we don't have a care in the world. We are relaxed, competent, confident people who tread our path through the world assuming that our way will be strewn with rose petals.

If you take the time to look into our eyes, you will see that we are all haunted, haunted by our pasts, by our fears, by our lack of trust, by our lack of faith. We are all overcompensating and in fight or flight mode, generally flight. We are all on the run.

The season of Lent calls us out, urges us to stop and forces us to admit that not only are we not in control of everything that we think we are, clearly we aren't doing such a great job at it anyway. It's time to recognize that the old ways of doing, the old ways of seeing, are not working for us. Speaking only for myself, that means the painful task of acknowledging that the universe was not created simply for my comfort, convenience and happiness. I heard a comment once that said "I have good news, and I have better news. The good news is that yes, there is a Messiah. The better news is that it's not you!" Lent, and its opening bell of Ash Wednesday, serves as my personal, annual reminder to slide out from behind the steering wheel and relinquish control of the vehicle. And just in time, too.

It's symbolic to me that Ash Wednesday uses the ashes of our own burnt-out souls to flag us down and remind us who is really driving the bus. There is a Messiah, and it's not me.

It's the path of *that* Messiah that we are guided to follow through our Lenten practices, following him on his journey through death to

resurrection, the death of those old ways or seeing, thinking and being and resurrection into the new, a journey that Marcus Borg reminds us is repentance. But that repentance, he says, “is not primarily about feeling guilty about our sins, or about doing penance (think of the common practice of “giving up” something for Lent- whether meat or chocolate or alcohol or shopping and so forth). The biblical meanings of repentance are primarily twofold. On the one hand, it means “to return” to God, “re-connect” with God. On the other hand, it means “to go beyond the mind that we have.” To stretch ourselves to do all this better than we have been, to, as Father Dan Meyer, a Catholic priest in Ohio wrote, imitate God. “Our God”, he says, is compassionate; we are called to be compassionate. Our God is a reconciler; we are called to be reconciled to our God and to be reconcilers to others. Our God forgives; we are called to forgive. Lent is the season of returning to the image of God that we were fashioned to reflect. It is a time when we work anew at being reconcilers, peacemakers, prophets, those who speak on behalf of God and Christ”.

Believe me when I say this interpretation was good news to me. No surprise to anyone here, I am much happier doing something than giving something up. Not being of a naturally introspective bent, I have a hard time understanding how forgoing an oreo is going to bring me closer to the kingdom. Listening for a call to action is much more my speed.

There is a program that I mentioned a number of years ago called Create a Ripple that linked the weeks of Lent with social justice awareness, an idea that bears looking into if we are indeed hopeful of repentance, returning to God and going beyond the patterns that we have. Little steps can make a difference, ranging from water conservation, to buying fair trade groceries, to actually seeing the person in front of you: Practice seeing and respecting all people, they urge us. The clerk at the store, the

homeless man on the street corner, or anyone taken for granted or ignored. Recognize their inherent dignity, no matter their circumstances.

My Lenten practice will include some of these suggestions; I encourage you to also find ways to follow the steps of Jesus as he ministered to marginalized and the forgotten. I truly believe that our collective salvation is to be found in our attempt to speak on behalf of God and Christ.

Pope Francis has said that one of the actions to be taken during Lent was to open our hearts to our brothers and sisters, that we should use the season to shake ourselves out of the apathy and self-centeredness in which we generally live our lives: "We get used to violence, as if it were everyday news taken for granted; we get used to our brothers and sisters who sleep on the streets, who don't have a roof over their heads. We get used to refugees seeking freedom and dignity who aren't welcomed as they should be." An authentic Lent must reconnect us with all God's people who follow the path to Easter.

The prayer book invites us all to "the observance of a holy Lent, by self-examination and repentance; by prayer, fasting and self-denial; and by reading and meditating on God's holy word." My hope for all of us is that our holy Lent includes, not only self examination but an attempt to extend the compassion, reconciliation and forgiveness that we hope to receive.

Amen.