

## Approaching Lent

Ash Wednesday, 2019

Rev. Kathryn Escandell, First Presbyterian Church, McAllen, Texas

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With the way sound bounces around this sanctuary, I imagine the echo of Jesus' words: *And when you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites who disfigure their faces* will have faded by the time you come forward to have your face disfigured with a cross of ashes marked on your forehead. But it's still a bit disconcerting that we are about to respond to Jesus' teaching by doing the exact thing he is teaching against.

Last night at the Shrove Tuesday Pancake supper, there were tables set up in the Fellowship Hall with activities that invited us to think about and engage in the Lenten disciplines of "Pray, Fast, Give" (show sign). As members of a faith community, we regularly engage in public acts of faith, both here at the church and in other contexts. Now, we've come to church on this Ash Wednesday to read of Jesus warning his disciples precisely about giving, praying, and fasting in public.

Hmmm.

We might want to comfort ourselves by reading Jesus' words closely, focusing on the part that cautions his followers to "beware of practicing our piety before others *in order to be seen by them*". If we examine the motives for our prayer, fasting, and alms-giving and can acquit ourselves of doing such things in pursuit of public acclaim or enhanced reputation, then maybe these verses aren't so hard to read.

But they should be hard to read. The season of Lent isn't about finding the most comforting, least distressing way to understand Scripture. The season of Lent is about understanding our need for repentance, our deep dependence upon God's mercy and grace.

One theologian suggests that hearing Jesus warn us against public piety and then immediately engaging in an act of public piety is the first step on our Lenten journey of self-examination and repentance. She describes it this way:

Lent grapples with the fact that human denial mechanisms are very strong. Most of the time we need to think, and we need others to think, that we are decent persons. Most of the time we consciously abstract from our own mortality. The Ash Wednesday liturgy stage-manages us into public exposure: we are not what we seem. Hearing and deliberately disobeying the gospel by receiving ashes is a way of coming out of the closet to ourselves and others as dust-to-dust-returning, as people who are not pure in heart, who do not love God with all we have, who still equivocate between merely human aspirations and kingdom goals. (Marilyn McCord Adams, *Feasting on the Word*, B-2, p. 24).

Lent as a season of self-examination and repentance should not discourage us from engaging in acts of piety. Prayer, fasting, and alms-giving are spiritual disciplines that can do much to bring new life and hope into our own lives and to the world. But the self-examination and repentance of Lent should discourage us from believing that we can attain righteousness through our own efforts. The message and the meaning of Lent is that we are to surrender to God, turning to God for forgiveness, trusting in God's grace. Lent is the season when we confront and admit that we are caught in sin, both individually and collectively. Lent is the season when we seek to be honest about sin; honest and humble about our need to be redeemed and freed from sin.

The image on the screen is by the artist Anneke Kaai and it accompanies Eugene Peterson's reflection on "Sin" from the book *In A Word*. What Kaai paints and Peterson writes offer us a doorway into our Lenten journey: (read from book)

A hundred years ago, a London newspaper asked several well-known public figures to each write an 800-word essay on the topic "What's Wrong with the World." Among those invited was the popular Fleet Street journalist, G. K. Chesterton. In response he wrote a one-word essay: "Me." What's wrong with the world? "Me."

Others wrote about poverty and economics, war and peace, ignorance and education, sickness and health, mediocrity and eugenics. And, of course, they each had a proposal on how to set right what is wrong with the world.

Only Chesterton came up with the obvious, which also happens to be the Christian answer: me. Identifying what is wrong with the world with "me" is a personal way of saying, "sin."

The proposals set forth by the other writers were intelligent and well informed. Some were brilliant. But they were also impersonal, dealing with programs or plans that would redistribute income, enact legislation, develop mechanisms or tools, and reform the educational system. None of them was without merit. Any one of them would have helped, some in substantial ways. But not one was personal. None identified the core "wrong," the man or woman who refuses, whether in ignorance or willfulness, to deal relationally and responsibly with what is "right" with the world, namely, God. They missed the biblically defined sin-target, me.

We are created to live in relationship and responsibility with one another and with our Creator and Savior. When we don't do it, it soon becomes apparent that there is something "wrong with the world" and somewhere in that "wrong" there is a "me." That's the place to start doing something about it.

Lent is the time to start doing something about it. Lent is the time to look at the ways our motives are mixed, our actions are self-serving, our attitudes are damaged and dangerous.

Lent is the time to open ourselves to the need for healing in our hearts, minds, spirits, relationships, world.

Even as we do the uncomfortable work of self-examination and repentance, we know that the God who comes to us in Jesus Christ can be trusted to bring that healing. Lent may not be a comfortable season. But it can be a life-giving one.

Amen.