

Holy God, Holy and Mighty, Holy Immortal One, have mercy upon us.+ Amen.

Like many of us here today, I wasn't always an Episcopalian. I grew up a devout little Methodist girl. I sang in the choir, attended Sunday School faithfully, won the little red ribbon for reciting the books of the Bible by memory... Church was a place of belonging: a place where I belonged among the community and the rhythms and traditions, and a place where it was OK to publicly belong to God. I remember Easter Sunday especially – such a bright happy day - the joyful hymns, and my new hat and gloves. But as wonderful as Easter Sunday was, it marked for me the first recognition that something was missing. I remember feeling for the first time a sense of separation, of feeling alone and a little lost among my community and family. How could we only celebrate the resurrection of Jesus, and not acknowledge all that had led up to it? What about the “before-time?”

You see for us in that time and community, our traditions did not include observing seasons of preparation. We didn't know about Advent, or Lent. There was no Holy Week, no Good Friday, no Great Vigil. We lightly jumped from Palm Sunday to Easter morning, and that's what I thought everybody did. I figured I was the only weird kid who needed something more.

Fast forward about twenty five years, driving to work one Wednesday morning in late winter, when I saw a young jogger running up the hill past me, his face sweaty and contorted with the effort of the climb. On his forehead was a striking jagged black cross. I realized it must be that thing they call Ash Wednesday, and here was a young man willing to “go public” with the symbol of his inner life, with the sign of the Cross. It hit me hard. The concept of Ash Wednesday, of Lent, of acknowledging the painful reality of all that led up to the resurrection of Jesus Christ – this really moved me, and it wasn't much longer after that that my search led me to the Episcopal church.

We all have our own memories, our own faith journeys. Wrestling with and articulating the evolution of our faith is a lifelong process, and one which I believe pleases God. Like a proud parent watching their child formulate their early thoughts, God sees our early understandings grow and mature. I remember my relief in discovering Lent, and my first understanding of it being a way of walking more closely with Jesus his “before-time,” the forty days leading up to his crucifixion. We fast, and pray; we meditate on him and what he was willing to do for us. It is a time of deep reflection, of penitence in acknowledgement that there is nothing we could ever do to be worth the suffering he willingly took on. The forty days of Lent is a time when we walk with his disciples; we take on practices that keep us awake to what he went through. We eat and drink the bread and the wine like he asked us to; we pray like he taught us to pray; we wash each others' feet like he washed the disciples' feet. We engage all of our senses in being truly present to him. In a way, Lent is a particularly sensate and corporeal time of living out what we believe. We allow ourselves a bolder stance in proclaiming our inner life; somehow Christians are a little more “allowed” to be Christians

in Lent. Like that early morning runner with the sign of the Cross blazed across his forehead, we feel more able in Lent to be outwardly known as followers of Jesus.

Our scripture today has Jesus teaching us to be careful about empty appearances. He points out the hollowness of prayers proclaimed for an audience, of devotions done with an eye towards the onlooker. Jesus said, *“And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.”*

It is a worthy question to wonder about wearing outward and visible signs of our devotion, especially on a day like today. I know of some churches that hand out wet wipes at the exit door, admonishing the faithful to wipe away the ashes from their foreheads. Other churches hold that to wear one's ashes publicly is a strong statement of faith, and one that Jesus deserves from us. I think it might be a question for each person to work out for themselves, in their own faith evolution, with Jesus' words to guide us: let us be very sure that our devotions are for him, and from the heart.

As I grow into my own understanding of Lent, I am struck by a wider sense of this “before-time.” Lent is not only a closer walk with Jesus through the forty days of time before his death. It is also a recognition of the “before-time” of life on earth for all humankind: Lent is a time of deep reflection on the magnitude of all that Christ did, for the sins of the whole world. What Jesus did in offering himself up to death on the Cross for our sakes ripped the veil for all time between heaven and earth; life for all people, for all time, was forever changed. Lent is a time to ponder the magnitude of all that he gave, manifesting his reach through all the worlds. Lent is a blessing, a sweet relief, a time when we can practice walking more faithfully and standing taller as his people. Let this Lent evolve us, grow us, change us so irrevocably that the mark of his cross on our foreheads is unmistakable, seen or unseen.

Amen.

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