

## Lent 1

## “Remember You Are Of God, and To God You Shall Return.”

Genesis 9:8-17

Psalm 25:1-9

1 Peter 3:18-22

Mark 1:9-15

*“And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him.”*

In the name of Almighty God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.+ *Amen.*

Today we enter into the season of Lent, remembering the forty days and forty nights in which our Lord was tried and tempted in every way by Satan. Out of this forty days, Jesus emerged ready to take on his ministry of preaching, teaching, and healing. Out of this forty days, he reentered the world, strengthened to endure what he knew was coming; willing to give it all for us, for the sake of his love. Today we are reminded of our weakness in the face of his strength, of our smallness in the presence of his power, of our indebtedness in the face of his great grace.

We actually entered into this special season of Lent four days ago on Ash Wednesday, taking some time out of the rush and tumble and endless press of life to remember one of the absolute truths about life on earth: we are mortal. We are finite creatures: we are born; we live; we die. We take our place among all finite, beloved, natural beings, and we remember that we are just as much a part of the natural created order of life as the squirrels, and the grass. This normal circle from birth to death begins in helplessness, grows into fullness of life and strength, continues in a natural decline, and finally comes to an end. This circle of mortal life is natural; it is how God created us, and there is nothing broken about it. But it is one that we often mourn, as we mourn all loss, as we mourn the suffering that takes so many forms during the decline of life. This circle of mortal life, and the reality of suffering for even our Lord Jesus, is very much on our minds today as we prepare our hearts for the Lenten journey we begin this week. We take time in Lent to step off of the endless road of mortal work and worry, and turn our hearts to the circular movement of our life in the spirit.

We’ve just come through the seasons of reflective, beautiful Advent, joyous celebratory Christmas, and glad Epiphany. This week we gathered for Shrove Tuesday, where we celebrated with song and play and silliness the last Feast of Fat Things, and then entered into the quiet weight of Lent. In this season we remember, and prepare for the coming dread of betrayal and death of our precious Lord. We find ourselves on this winding road, as Christians always do, having one foot in the past – walking alongside him with our hearts breaking through his last unimaginable days – and having one foot in the future, knowing that he is risen, ascended, and will come again. But today we mark the first Sunday of this very special, set-apart time of Lent.

One of the things I love about Lent is that we are allowed, in this post-Christendom world, to be a bit more public about declaring ourselves to be people of God, people longing for God. Earlier this week on Ash Wednesday, we heard the lesson from Matthew’s Gospel, teaching us to not make it a regular practice to wear our spiritual disciplines publicly. But on Ash Wednesday, it is a beautiful thing to me to be able to see publicly how many Christians there are in the world, bearing the cross of Christ on their faces.

For the last three years in Manhattan, I served on Ash Wednesday at several churches, including St. Paul's Chapel at Ground Zero. This is the church directly next to the World Trade Center, which on September 11<sup>th</sup> had filled with soot and ash up past peoples' knees, as they continued in prayer vigils and in offering rest and refuge to the First Responders. You can imagine how powerful it was to serve there on Ash Wednesday, imposing ashes on the foreheads of the thousands of people that came through those doors. Elders who somehow made the trek there with walkers and wheelchairs, young people with their fresh faces, adults with their faces careworn, little ones running up, babies in their strollers. People of all nationalities and languages, *everyone* with their sweet, upturned faces. "*Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.*" I so wanted to add, "and there is nothing broken about this." I so wanted to say instead, "Remember that you are of God, and to God you shall return." As hard as it was to be the reminder of our mortality in a place already so heavy with that message, at the same time it was a joy and a wonder to see so many thousands of people – in the chapel, on the streets and subways of Manhattan - bearing the mark of the cross of Christ on their forehead. Maybe it's not such a post-Christendom world, after all!

In Lent we simplify; we let go of things that distract us, that consume us, that separate us from closeness with our Lord. We try to withstand our temptations, like Jesus did in the desert. We think about sin, and we wonder about the concept of "original sin," the sin of our first mother and father in the Garden. Could it be that the sweet newborn baby in her mothers' arms could possibly be born into sin?

Perhaps the "original sin" of Adam and Eve was the sin of self-absorption, of putting their desires first, ahead of God's. It is this same self-absorption that we see in little children – a natural part of the process of surviving and growing. But when this self-absorption, this putting ourselves first, continues on into adult life, it is not healthy, and it is a barrier between us and each other, and between us and God. And so we practice, one day at a time, a new way of putting the other first, letting go of our desires for just a little while. We savor the simple things, and allow ourselves to experience what is to lack a little. To be lighter and clearer. To have less in the way between us and God.

May you enter today into a Holy Lent, into a closer walk with our Lord. May your forty days and forty nights bring you closer to his pain, closer to his love, closer to the reality of his extraordinary gift to all. Let the ashes from Ash Wednesday remind you that yes, we are dust, and to dust we shall return, but let them remind you also of the outrageous good news that that's not the end of the story! The largest circle of all, the circle of life which began before time with Christ as the Alpha, circles on into the Omega of eternal life with him, thanks to our Lord Jesus' gift of himself on the cross, gathering up all possible realms of human sin and suffering into the great strength and grace of his forgiving arms, opening wide the gates of heaven to all of us mortal ones.

Amen.

The Rev. Julia A. Fritts  
February 28, 2009  
St. John's Church, Stamford