

Devotions – February 14-20, 2021

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Ash Wednesday and the First Days of Lent

Sunday, February 14, 2021

Text: Luke 6: 27-29(a) & 35(b)-36

But I tell you who hear me: Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you. If someone strikes you on one cheek, turn him the other also. ...Then your reward will be great and you will be sons of the Most High, because he is kind to the ungrateful and wicked. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.

On this day when the whole world is focused on expressing love to each other, may we focus on the most spectacular expression of love – God’s Son, who suffered hatred, cursing, mistreatment, physical violence and finally death on the cross - all for our sins. Mother Teresa also wrote about love in a way that captures many aspects of our society today. “Never has the world had a greater need to love than in our day. People are hungry for love.” In the midst of a world-wide pandemic and recent domestic terrorism, we must share God’s love but also hold accountable all those who have harmed others and destroyed property - that they may repent of their violence and receive God’s mercy.

We pray: *Yes Lord, we thank you for the greatest gift of Love, your Son Jesus Christ, who inspires us to love one another in all things – and especially to love our neighbors as you have loved us. May we do so through keeping each other safe from Covid-19, praying for the millions who have died from Covid-19 and their families, for all who have suffered economic hardship, and for all of the brave health care professionals who have worked tirelessly to care for so many. Amen*



Text: Isaiah 59: 9,10,14 & 15

So justice is far from us and righteousness does not reach us. We look for light, but all is darkness; for brightness, but we walk in deep shadows. Like the blind, we grope along the wall, feeling our way like men without eyes. At midday, we stumble as if it were twilight;

among the strong, we are like the dead. ... So justice is driven back and righteousness stands at a distance; truth has stumbled in the streets, honesty cannot enter. Truth is nowhere to be found, and whoever shuns evil becomes a prey.

Despite the gloominess of this passage, I am always inspired by the poetry of Isaiah and how it can speak to both the conditions at the time it was written as well as those in contemporary times. This passage could describe many moments in human history – countless wars, slavery, and many examples of our inhumanity as well as the darkness of grief, loss, addiction, poverty, hopelessness, broken relationships, loneliness, discrimination, persecution, etc. Some may find it relevant at this point in our time.

Interestingly, Helen Keller wrote, “Unless we form the habit of going to the Bible in bright moments as well as in trouble, we cannot fully respond to its consolations because we lack the equilibrium between light and darkness.” And thus, in contrast we also have this promise, “Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life.” Jesus is the “light from God” – a beacon in a dark world that lights our way and shows us how to live in God’s light.

We pray: *Most Gracious and loving God, be with us in these dark and troubled times when truth and justice seem far away and hard to find. Enable us to discern your will and strengthen our resolve to seek and live out your truth and justice. Console us Lord, so that even in the darkness we may perceive your light and serve as messengers of love and hope to all in need. Amen*



Tuesday, February 16, 2021

Shrove Tuesday

Text: Ecclesiastes 3:1-4 & 8

***There is a time for everything and a season for every activity under heaven:
a time to be born and a time to die, a time to plant and a time to uproot,
a time to kill and a time to heal, a time to tear down and a time to build up,
a time to weep and a time to laugh, a time to mourn and time to dance, ...
a time to love and a time to hate, a time for war and a time for peace.***

The day before the beginning of Lent created a number of local customs differing by culture and regions of the world. Most had to do with hearty eating and drinking before the formal fast of

Lent began on Ash Wednesday and were known by various names – Mardi Gras, Carnival, Pancake Day, etc. However, the church did not attach spiritual significance and thus there were never any formal scriptures or liturgy for what is informally called *Shrove Tuesday*.

Hence in our scripture for today in which we are told “there is a season for every activity under heaven” we see a balance by recognizing that all things indeed have their time and place. And as we consider Jesus’ teachings, we understand that the time has truly come, the Kingdom of God is at hand, and Jesus’ very words in the Gospels are truly a call for *change*.

We pray: *God of all seasons, of both feasting and fasting, you guide us through the letting go’s and the new beginnings in our lives. Especially in these many months of the pandemic, may we always remember the loss of so many, their families and friends and celebrate their lives well-lived. Amen*



Wednesday, February 17, 2021

Ash Wednesday

Texts: Genesis 3:19; 2 Corinthians 5:20-21; Matthew 6:5a,6a; Matthew 6:16a,17-18a; and Joel 2:13

By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you return to the ground, since from it you were taken; for dust you are and to dust you shall return.

We are therefore Christ’s Ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ’s behalf: Be reconciled to God. God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

And when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by men. ... But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen.

When you fast, do not look somber as the hypocrites do, for they disfigure their faces to show men they are fasting. ...But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that it will not be obvious to men that you are fasting, but only to your Father who is unseen; ...

Rend your heart and not your garments. Return to the Lord your God, for he is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love ...

On Ash Wednesday, as we begin our Lenten journey through prayer, fasting and the imposition of ashes, these scriptures serve to center us, beginning with the words in Genesis, written perhaps 500 years before Christ. In 2 Corinthians, Paul describes our ultimate and most important role, as “Christ’s Ambassadors” to the world - but only because Christ has taken on our sin such that through his death and resurrection we have become reconciled to God.

And yet, as Christ’s Ambassadors, on the day in which we, (in “normal times”), might display ashes on our foreheads to others and fast throughout the day, we are reminded through Jesus’ words to not pray in public and to wash our faces so no one will know we are fasting.

Joel’s words then point us in the right direction to “rend our hearts and not our garments” as we begin our Lenten journey.

We pray: *May we hold all of these scriptures in our hearts and reclaim the season of Lent as a time of spiritual renewal through reflection, prayer and repentance. And may we be ever mindful of Jesus’ teachings and strive to follow his example in our lives. Amen.*



Thursday, February 18, 2021

Texts: Deuteronomy 30:19-20a
and Luke 9:23-25

This day I call heaven and earth as witnesses against you that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Now choose life, so that you and your children may live and that you may love the Lord your God, listen to his voice, and hold fast to him. For the Lord is your life. ...

And he said to them, If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will save it.

This passage from Deuteronomy is one of the last statements that Moses made to the Israelites before Joshua became their leader. He exhorts them to “choose life” for themselves and their descendants and certainly to “love God, listen to his voice and hold fast (remain faithful) to him.” God represents life, freedom from oppression in Egypt (albeit 40+ years ago) and prosperity in the land “flowing with milk and honey” promised to their forefathers.

In the passage from Luke, Jesus not only raises the expectations but creates a paradox that would be difficult to make into a life agenda. These words of Jesus, "... whoever loses his life for me will save it," appear in all four Gospels and more than once in two of them. No other words spoken by Jesus are given such emphasis. In this new covenant, represented by God's greatest sacrifice and gift to us, we must seek more than life, but in fact, a new and deeper life in God's kingdom, taking up the cross and loving and serving mankind.

We pray: *Guide us, Lord, as we daily seek to lose our life for you, to speak your truth, to do your will, and to share your love. Amen*



Friday, February 19, 2021

Texts: Isaiah 58:6-8 and Matthew

9:14-15

Is this not the kind of fasting I have chosen: to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke? Is it not to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter – when you see the naked to clothe him, and not turn away from your own flesh and blood? Then your light will break forth like the dawn and your healing will quickly appear; then your righteousness will go before you and the glory of the Lord will be your rear guard.

Then John's disciples came and asked him, "How is it that we and the Pharisees fast, but your disciples do not fast." Jesus answered, "How can the guests of the bridegroom mourn while he is with them? The time will come when the bridegroom will be taken from them, then they will fast."

On the first Friday of Lent, a day which would often be considered a *fast* day, the theme of the texts is clearly fasting. In Isaiah we find examples of fasting that is acceptable. What we notice is that none of these acceptable fasts have anything to do with self-improvement, self-sacrifice, or self at all – but always serving others.

In Matthew, when Jesus is questioned about fasting, he changes the subject and reframes the question – and introduces the metaphor of the wedding guests and the bridegroom. The wedding banquet is all about inclusion, with God as a magnanimous host warning us against stinginess or exclusion. This is how Jesus understands fasting – fasting from our prejudices, our superiority and our ethnic divisions. A wedding banquet is not about fasting in the normal sense – quite the

opposite. Jesus is inviting humanity to a common celebration in which **all** are invited, and the only fasting is from our fears and divisions. Jesus' emphasis is always on the positive, channeling desire and knowing what you love, not what you are against or avoiding, but instead on the wonderful wedding banquet he has prepared.

We pray: *Guide us to fast from our prejudices and divisions and seek universal inclusion at your wedding banquet both now and later. Amen*



Saturday, February 20, 2021

Texts: Isaiah 58: 9(b) – 11 and
Luke 5:27-32

If you do away with the yoke of oppression, with the pointing finger and malicious talk, and if you spend yourselves on behalf of the hungry and satisfy the needs of the oppressed, then your light will rise in the darkness and your night will become like the noonday. The Lord will guide you always; he will satisfy your needs in a sun-scorched land and will strengthen your frame. You will be like a well-watered garden, like a spring whose waters never fail. Your people will rebuild the ancient ruins and will raise up the age-old foundations. You will be called Repairers of Breaches and Restorers of Ruined Homesteads.

After this, Jesus went out and saw a tax collector by the name of Levi sitting at his tax booth. “Follow me,” Jesus said to him and Levi got up, left everything and followed him. Then Levi held a great banquet for Jesus at his house and a large crowd of tax collectors and others were eating with them. But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law who belonged to their sect complained to the disciples, “Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners? Jesus answered them, “It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance.”

In the text from Isaiah, we take it one step further, so that fasting from oppression, false accusation and malicious speech will lead one to harmony with God, as a “spring whose water never fails” and the opportunity for building bridges between opposing ideas/beliefs and perhaps restoring the “breaches” in society.

In this familiar passage from Luke, we have Jesus himself crossing cultural and religious boundaries and inviting a Roman sympathizer to join his inner group and sharing a meal with Levi and his fellow tax collectors. Naturally, he is publicly questioned and the criticism is

plausible from the point of view of the Pharisees. Again, Jesus reframes the encounter to define his agenda of healing: “I have not come for the self-righteous, but for the sick,” he says. Thus Jesus, by “fasting” from false accusations and malicious speech, fulfills the promise of Isaiah as one who is a “repairer of breaches” and a “restorer of ruined homesteads” and who will now truly “rebuild the ancient ruins” of his religion. As with Levi (and all of the disciples), Jesus asked them (and us) to follow him and specifically to welcome all of humanity – the supposedly unworthy, the sinners, the outsiders to his always open hospital – all of us for whom he came.

We pray: God of all people, revealed in Jesus, we come to you asking that you expand and open our hearts. Teach us how to build a world that cares for the sick and the outsider and not just the seemingly healthy. Through your Holy Spirit, enable us to care for the sick, feed and clothe those in need, give comfort to those in prison, stand with those who are persecuted, and speak your truth each day. And help us to see your message as one that can build bridges to all religions and cultures. Amen

