

Keeping a Holy Lent

Ash Wednesday Sermon - 17 February 2021

How many of you remember having a pancake feast the night before Ash Wednesday?

Knox United used to host a pancake supper, it was the first event I attended after I moved to Fernie five years ago. Do you know where the practice came from?

Back in the seventh century when Pope Gregory abolished eating meat during Lent, the people needed to use up their eggs, butter and milk in preparation for Lent. He told St. Augustine of Canterbury, England to do the same thing. And it caught on.

Do you know what Fat Tuesday is? You may know it better by Mardi Gras...the french words for fat Tuesday. It's a great festival of celebration, colour, beads and feasts that takes place just ahead of Ash Wednesday. Fat Tuesday is better known in the church as Shrove Tuesday, which gets it's name from shriving, which is to confess sins before a priest, or simply before God, to ensure you have a clean heart before entering the season of Lent.

Lent is 40 days plus Sundays. It begins with Ash Wednesday. We collect the palms from last year and because they are so dry, they burn fairly easily. The ashes are then used to make crosses on people's foreheads with the prayer "remember you are dust and to dust you shall return". A sobering reminder of our mortality.

For some, Lent is a season which carries very little significance; it's a period of time where we wait for Easter. For some, Lent is a powerful time of self-reflection and self-redirection; It's a time to do a deep dive and address those things that make us feel badly about ourselves. For some, Lent is a time of self-deprivation;, it's a time for "giving up" something we enjoy i.e. coffee or chocolate or alcohol. I do not believe it is a coincidence that Tim Horton's holds it's Roll Up the Rim to Win during Lent...to entice those who may be considering abstinence from their favourite hot beverage.

Wherever you are on this spectrum is where you are supposed to be.

For me, Lent is my favourite season of the year, even more so than Christmas or Easter. Lent has not been corrupted by Disney or Hallmark. Lent isn't as well understood outside of the Church...and in some cases within the Church. I see Lent as a time to refocus on what is important. To do those deep dives and correct behaviours which are not healthy. It's not so much about self-denial as it is about self-love and self-care.

Rather than depriving myself of something I enjoy, I try to set down something that is not good for me, such as negative self-talk or complaining. Instead of talking down to myself, or using self-deprecating humour, I remind myself that I am just as worthy of love as anyone else. I try to speak to myself in the same way I speak to others. Instead of complaining, I try to focus on blessings. Even on the worst days, I can usually find something that has been a blessing. Such as a roof over my head on a cold day, or a purring cat that seems to like me.

In the ancient language the liturgy would contain the words "miserable offenders", which can be quite off-putting in the twenty-first century. The focus of Lent was self-denial, study of scripture and offerings to the poor. While we do spend time in the liturgy remembering that we are broken, we do not live there. Throughout the liturgy there are ribbons of hope, glimpses of love and promises of eternal life.

Please don't let the language of the liturgy turn you away from this most important season. Most of the time I'm encouraging you to focus outward, to turn your light into the world, that others may be drawn to that light. For the season of Lent I want you to turn your light inward, and do the hard work on yourself.

Last year we did a Lenten eco-challenge. The previous couple of years we did other Lenten challenges. This year we are not. There are plenty of resources available online and I will attach links to the email tonight with the services and sermon. If you choose to take up a Lenten challenge, please do so. If you feel it will help you focus, then please, do so.

We will walk through Lent together, already knowing what online Zoom worship looks like. I am making a rather large assumption that we will not be back in the buildings for Easter. We are nearly a year in lockdown, for some it has been nearly a year since we have seen each other, or participated in the Eucharist.

While there is much for which to be thankful, there is also much to lament. And I am asking you, my brothers and sisters, to continue to hold fast. Wash your hands often and for at least 20 seconds. Wear a mask whenever you leave the house. Say your prayers, again for at least 20 seconds. And know that you are deeply and truly loved.

We have survived this long. We are now waiting on vaccines. Which will, God willing, bring us closer to being able to join together in Worship. We cannot go back to how things were pre-COVID. The world and the Church have changed irrevocably. What we can and should do is focus on the lessons we have learned about community, and family, and what it means to “be Church”.

We cannot, and must not “go back”. We can and we must go forwards into a brave new world.

But right now, we are about to enter the most sacred time of the year. A time of year when façades come down, eyes open wide, hearts dare to yearn, and skeletons are removed from closets. A time of year when behaviours are examined, stock is taken, and difficult questions are asked, of ourselves, by ourselves. It’s not a pretty or light time of year. It can be dark and ugly, yet it is necessary and, if the work is done, can be incredibly rewarding.

So my brothers and sisters, as we walk through this time together, may you know that no matter how unworthy you may feel, God loves you. No matter what deep, dark secrets you are holding on you, God already knows. No matter what you have done in your past, God forgives you. The question is, can you love yourself? Can you let go of the secrets? Can you forgive yourself?

Take your burdens and set them at the foot of the cross, even if only for a while. You can set them down, because you won’t need them. Give them to God. Let God hold onto them for a while. And hopefully, if you come back for them, they won’t be there, because God will have taken care of them.

I wish you a holy and blessed Lent.

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