

Ash Wednesday Feb 17, 2021—7pm
Sermon by Rev. A.N. Mary Adelsberger

Hands down, if I ask you what your favorite holiday or service is, none of you would say Ash Wednesday. Christmas, advent, Thanksgiving...yeah, those are the popular ones. The happiness, the joy of anticipation, the beauty of the seasons, the birth of a child, the death of a turkey, the celebrations, parties, feasting... it all adds a hopeful newness to our souls. Lent...not so much. In fact, just last week, when I visited someone, they said they hated Lent...too much work, services, not enough family time. Yeah, our culture doesn't promote it...no one sets their DVR to record the Lenten peanuts special. We don't have live actors in sackcloth and ashes. Lent, starting with Ash Wednesday, is a time to remind ourselves of our brokenness. That confuses us. No one knows what to make of a day that celebrates our sinfulness and the fact that we will one day die.

Yes, "Sin" is an outdated, old word. We've progressed beyond the religious authority that holds us captive. If we say we are sinners, well, society thinks, it can cause psychological damage and low self-esteem. Hmm...maybe it's because we can control ourselves, and that's what bothers us. We are broken, in bondage, in need.

I think the opposite. We need a savior, and we have one. We get to unburden ourselves and come away freed. Confession is good for the soul. Acknowledging that we are not in control is freeing. Knowing that we get to have a blank ledger to start again without blemish all the time...priceless. Well, it wasn't priceless, Christ paid the price for us. That's the truth. Ash Wednesday reminds us we are not perfect, we have faults, but also that we are loved, forgiven, and this life is not all there is!

Joel says to return to God with all of our heart, rather than return to God with all our actions. In Lent, we tend to focus on our behavior. However, to call us to return with all our hearts suggests that our hearts belong to other things besides God. So, if we think Lent is about giving things up so we can impress God maybe we should ask ourselves: which is harder – the fasting or the returning to God with all our heart? Why fast? Spending too much time on Facebook or overeating sugar isn't most of our sins. My problem...and maybe yours too, is that I piece out my heart to things that cannot love me back. It's possible to piece our hearts out to the love of false promises and self-indulgence. One theologian said, "the toxicity of 'things' seems to preserve the human heart like formaldehyde."

For the next 40 days, we will journey through the Wilderness of Lent. Deserts have a way of bringing about spiritual clarity... Thankfully we will walk this desert road of repentance with Jesus. Lent will offer us the opportunity to hack through self-delusion and false promises. Pastors Bowmer of St. Paul, Hanley of Glenwood, Intern West-Estell, and myself will be sharing messages about the wilderness during Weds in lent. Each of us is preaching 2 times during the Lenten season and hosting worship at our churches with our worship teams. These will all be recorded for us to view on You Tube. It's exciting to worship as a Parish, It's meaningful to work through our journeys in the wilderness together.

This season is not one of self-denial – but one of relinquishing control of our own lives. That is why I have learned to embrace the beauty and the pain of Lent. It is during Lent that I can reflect on my hang-ups and heartaches; my sins and fears... It is then I'm able to repent. 40 days when I can just be, breathe, worship, fellowship. I can let go, and I hope you will too.

As we begin the Lenten journey, be reminded that what matters is not what we give up, but what we choose to relinquish. I want to get rid of the stuff that doesn't let me live in and give God's love. God loves you personally, so much that He wants you free to live, to breathe, to move...let go of your sin, let go of your hang-ups, let go of your business...let go of what gets in the way of love. Amen.