

“What It’s All About”
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Hickory Neck Episcopal Church, Toano, Virginia
Ash Wednesday – 5 March 2014
Isaiah 58:1-12, II Corinthians 5:20b-6:10, Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

Everyone in this room is going to die: hopefully, not today or tomorrow, but someday and perhaps sooner than we’d like. As Christians, we shouldn’t be too bothered by that. After all, we know the end of our story. The cross holds sway for only three days, and then the resurrection comes. However, despite our recognition that death is a door to a new life, we cherish our time on this earth, and don’t like to think about its conclusion.

That’s why Ash Wednesday is not among the most popular of holy days. Unlike Christmas and Easter and a host of other important occasions, there is no Hallmark card for Ash Wednesday. In a few moments, Father Henry will invite everyone forward to receive ashes, a symbol of our future demise. “Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.” And thus begins Lent, an often maligned and little understood season, when we give up our sweets or some other treat. And the danger is that our lives will go on, much as they did before, despite the solemn reminder that everyone in this room is going to die.

Throughout history, religions and philosophies have tried to respond to this invincible fact of human existence. Some counsel resignation. “Nothing can be done except to suffer with dignity and muddle through as best you can.” Others claim that “Life on this earth is an illusion.” Materialism proclaims that the one with the most toys at the end wins. Christians don’t have to settle for this.

The life God has given us counts. God does not deceive us with a life of illusion, nor cruelly offer a life without hope. We worship a God who creates us with noble attributes, designed to pursue noble purposes. The lives we live here and now have meaning. They matter. They make an impact beyond the sphere of our own experience or knowing. There is a grandeur to the Christian vision of what it means to be human, and because of that we can approach our death with confidence, aware of comforting promises, and yet also aware of the great significance of our lives on this earth.

With this in mind, we wonder what perhaps our purpose may be. Lent is a season of intensification that invites us to explore our purpose with careful intention. If all we do is leave out the alleluias and think guilty thoughts about ourselves, then we'd best not observe this holy time at all, but Lent gives us an opportunity to learn more about who we are, about who God is, and about our relationship with God that empowers us to live with a special purpose. We find a few clues about how we can identify and fulfill that God-given purpose for our lives in scripture.

We heard a passage from Paul's second letter to the Corinthians that exalts the joy brought by endurance. Paul encourages the confused, conflicted Corinthians to persist in their faith. Paul reflects upon the many dangers and pains that he and his companions have undergone in order to fulfill God's purpose for their lives. You name it; Paul went through it. From filthy prisons to mob justice in the back alleys, the man has the bruises and scars.

What makes Paul durable is not some tough stubbornness or macho attitude or stiff upper lip. No, it's the grace of God in his heart that enables him to endure, to carry on against all odds. And the salvation that Paul talks about, the salvation that has

transformed his life and made it worth living, that salvation is available to the people of Corinth – and the people of Hickory Neck – and to people everywhere . . . NOW.

Not tomorrow, not next week, not in five to seven business days, but right now, God is ready to enter any human heart ready to receive Him. So be reconciled to God and accept God's grace, and become a person who can endure hardships suffered for God's glory and the sake of others. Paul's vision of the fruits of graceful endurance can become a reality in our lives, if during Lent we seek out a grace that empowers us to pass along God's grace to others.

Likewise, the prophet Isaiah extols the service of others as the proper sacrifice of the penitent. Writing for a people in exile, Isaiah reshaped their religious consciousness. "Is such the fast that I choose, a day to humble oneself? Is it to bow down the head like a bulrush, and to lie in sackcloth and ashes? Will you call this a fast, a day acceptable to the Lord? Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from own kin?"

In other words, do the right thing for the right reasons. Allow your outward behavior to reflect an inward transformation catalyzed by God's grace. There are practical and immediate implications to the good news. To have a holy Lent, by all means pray and fast, because if we do so with open hearts, then we'll find ourselves animated for all sorts of transforming works in the world around us. Isaiah offers a worthy object for our Lenten disciplines, namely justice pursued through a life of selfless

sacrifice. The purpose of a holy life is more than the benefits we receive. It's about other people and their needs, too.

Surprisingly, this can be a difficult concept to grasp. If God's grace is free, then how can we be expected, much less obliged, to serve and to sacrifice? Well, there's a big difference between free grace and cheap grace, a distinction made clearly by Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a German pastor imprisoned and eventually executed by the Nazis for his resistance. The grace bestowed by Christ came at a cost, contended Bonhoeffer, and sentimental versions of Christianity tend to forget that cost and thereby cheapen grace. Yes, grace is free. We cannot earn it or deserve it or repay it in any way, and that's good news. But that doesn't mean that Christians are free to become users, abusers, and consumers of God's grace, without any responsibility to share. To do so is the height of hypocrisy.

In Matthew, we see Jesus attacking such hypocrisy, almost in imitation of the prophet Isaiah. Going through the motions simply will not do. Outward signs of piety, like giving alms, offering prayers, and fasting are all good habits, if they proceed from godly motives. It's a matter of authenticity. That's what Jesus and Isaiah want from us. Our outward behavior needs to reflect a deep inner purpose inspired by God's truth.

Such work is hard. Ash Wednesday and Lent challenge us in ways that other holy days and seasons do not, but for good reason. All of us fall down to the dust. The question is, between now and then, will our lives have been transformed by grace in such a way that we share God's blessings we have received with other people? That's the question Lent poses to us, and we have been given forty days to focus on and seeking out the answer. Amen.