

“Yield: The Point of Lent”
Meditation III – Perceive
The Rev. Michael L. Delk

As I mentioned in the first meditation, the English word Lent comes from a German root that means “spring.” That makes sense, when we consider the calendar. But take a look at what happens in the spring – the re-awakening, the rebirth, the fresh newness and delight of it all – and there’s a huge disconnect, right?

Lent doesn’t have anything to do with springtime. Lent is about forsaking pleasures, about introspection – not frolicking in nature. Lent means getting in touch with your guilt and spending long hours of dreary reflection on betrayal, injustice, torture, and death. The sunny warmth and bright colors of spring have no place here. As I commented to our Associate Rector, Ann, after the noonday Ash Wednesday Eucharist, “It’s February 6th, the sun is shining, and it’s 82 degrees out here. Doesn’t exactly put you in the Ash Wednesday mood.”

Perhaps we should rename Lent. It won’t be the first time. Lent wasn’t called Lent until the late Middle Ages. Up until that time, the season currently known as Lent went by a Latin name I can’t pronounce, which meant “forty days.” Maybe we should call Lent “Frump” or “Bummer” from now on, and we could just sigh deeply, as in, “Well, Ash Wednesday is this week, and another season of [long sigh] is upon us.”

Or could it be that our ancestors had it right, more right than they ever imagined when they labeled this sacred season Lent? Because Lent, though it builds up to a gruesome death, eventually leads us to resurrection. And the chief occupation of our Lenten devotion, repentance, is not what it seems.

Repentance evokes feelings of guilt and shame. In fact, for some people, the entire experience of repentance revolves around feeling sorry for specific sins and promising to do better in the future. For others, repentance involves a little more. Confessing sins and seeking forgiveness is like balancing an account with The Bank of Sanctity in the Sky. But repentance means something else entirely.

The word we translate as “repentance” comes from a Greek word, metanoia. That word consists of a root word, noia, and a prefix, meta. For those having flashbacks to grammar class, I promise we’ll be finished soon. We’re quite familiar with the prefix “meta,” as in metaphysics – literally “with or beyond the physics,” because this is how scrolls dealing with the topic were shelved in the library at Alexandria. Noia is a declension of the Greek word nous, which means mind. Except the Greeks thought of mind differently than we do. We think of mind as the center of cognition and emotion. The Greeks referred to nous as the seat of a person’s soul. So the word metanoia, which we translate as repentance, has nothing to do with feeling rotten. It literally means “with or beyond the mind.” A more colloquial translation might be “in sync” or even “transcending self.”

It might help at this point to bring in a similar word with which you may be more familiar. Paranoia uses the same permutation of the same Greek root, nous, which means mind in the broadest sense possible. The prefix para means “along side of,” as in paralegal. So the word paranoia describes a condition in which a person is literally beside themselves, or one could say that they are of two minds, which is very disruptive. If you’ve ever known a person suffering from paranoia, you’ve seen how warped their perceptions can be. Greek grammar lesson over; thanks for hanging in there.

With all this in mind, we began to see that repentance is less about balancing our account with God or feeling bad about ourselves, and it is more about a radical reorientation of who we are and how we perceive things. Arguably, under this framework, prior to repentance everyone is paranoid – filled with suspicion, unable to trust, consumed by anxiety, convinced that only they know the truth, only they know what’s really happening -- pretty much the attitude of people who blow through yield signs.

Remember that little internal monologue from the first meditation? “That sign isn’t for good drivers like me, and besides the people in the right-of-way lane are driving at a ridiculously slow pace.” Maybe all of that is factually accurate, but the ugly truth is, at that point, I think I’ve got all the answers. I’m the one who knows how things are supposed to go, and I can judge when the laws apply. That’s paranoid.

Then there’s the anxiety-driven motive to run the yield-sign. “Yes, it’s risky, but the risk is worth it, because if I don’t eke out this extra 12 seconds, then I’ll be less early than I would have been before, and my colleagues/parishioner/wife will be less impressed with my promptness.” How silly, but that’s paranoia – not the psychological pathology, but the spiritual pathology that assumes how people will react, if I don’t take a risk to meet some self-imposed standard that I’ve generously projected onto them.

What repentance, in the true sense of metanoia, offers us is the opportunity to go beyond that messed up state of mind, so that we can share in the mind of Christ. When we choose to align our minds with Christ, when we beg for the grace to be with Christ, we can go beyond our skewed perspective and begin to see with greater clarity.

Our enhanced perspective emerges out of a foundation of awareness. Without awareness, it is difficult to perceive, because perception has a quality of interpretation about it. Basic awareness is necessarily prior to the formation of perception. But once we are aware, in the fullest sense of that word, and our perspective corrected through repentance, our lives are renewed.

From this vantage point on repentance, as an opportunity to go beyond being beside oneself so that we can be with Jesus instead, we discover that Lent – from the root word spring – is the perfect word to describe what we are meant to do during these forty days. Lent is not principally about giving up chocolate or meat or alcohol. Lent isn't about feeling guilty, or toting up your sins like a gnarly version of the tote board on the Jerry Lewis Telethon.

Lent is about renewal. Lent is about slowing down enough that God can have the right-of-way in your life. By so doing, we increase the likelihood that greater awareness will emerge: great awareness of self and of God. And awareness almost always brings renewed perspective in its wake, the fruit of repentance.

I don't see how anything could be more important, because how we perceive the world dominates our behavior. If we see the world as a threatening place where we stand to lose everything, then our behavior will be motivated by fear, which makes it difficult to have faith, because faith requires risk and demands that we fear God and God alone.

That perception of the world as a threatening place that could take everything we value away from us -- that is spiritual paranoia of the first degree. Such thinking can certainly make us beside ourselves, and what is worse, this faulty perception neglects the true reality that nothing can take God's love from us. "For I am convinced," with the

Apostle Paul, “that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.” [Romans 8:38-39]

This is not to say that the world is a safe place. It isn't. But we need not allow our insecurities to dominate the life we live for God. A penitent person sees possibility, where the paranoid perceive only doom. So be penitent, be metanoid. Turn yourself around, away from the forces that threaten to destroy, and toward the presence that promises life abundant. Be renewed and perceive. Hear the word of God prophesying through Isaiah, “Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old. I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?” [Isaiah 43:18-19]

“For now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view,” Paul counseled the Corinthians in his second letter, “even though we once knew Christ from a human point of view, we know him no longer in that way. So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!” [II Corinthians 5:16-17]

Do you see? Would you like to? Have you been renewed lately? Would you like to be? Would you like to slow down, be aware, and perceive more clearly than ever before? Then repent. Seek healing for your paranoid, disruptive way of thinking, and be metanoid. Transcend with Jesus. It's an eagle-eye view, and it will change your life and the lives of all who receive your witness.

That's the point of Lent. It's springtime for our souls. So yield. Yield to God the right-of-way in your life, fall in behind Him and follow. God knows where He might take us, and that's alright when you're living in faith.