

“Return to the Lord”
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Hickory Neck Episcopal Church – Toano, VA
Ash Wednesday – February 25, 2009
Joel 2:1-2, 12-17

During the weekend of Annual Council, all of the clergy had an opportunity to meet with the Presiding Bishop for some conversation. She started off by talking about Jesus’ baptism and reminding us of the words we heard at the beginning of Epiphany: “You are my beloved; in you I am well pleased.” She asked us to contrast that with a different message, “I am a miserable sinner.” She said we frequently add on, “and you’re worse.” She gave us five minutes of silence and asked us to meditate on those words, “You are my beloved; in you I am well pleased.” As I sat in the silence, I was amazed, as I always am when I hear those words, at how much easier it is to believe that I am a miserable sinner, worthless and unlovable, than it is to believe that God loves me and is pleased with me. Or, if I’m not dwelling on being a miserable sinner, I focus on how I need to pray more, give more, DO more to earn God’s love.

I sat there in the silence and thought about how peaceful it was to rest in the presence of God. And I started making promises. I’m going to pray more from now on. I’m going to read more books about theology and scripture. I’m going to spend all my extra hours praying and reading and being with God. I’m going to give up tv. The list of ways I was going to be a better Christian began expanding in my head. And then I stopped. Because I realized I was falling into the same old trap. Thinking that I have to do more in order for God to love me. Thinking that it’s not possible for God to love me just the way I am. And I realized that God loves me, even when I’m not praying or reading. God loves me all the time. Just as I am.

And then I began thinking about Lent. You see Lent doesn't seem to be a time for realizing we are beloved children of God. Lent is that penitential season when we remember what miserable sinners we are. Lent is the time when we remember Jesus' forty days of temptation in the wilderness and the ancient Israelites' forty years of wandering in the wilderness. In just a few minutes we will come forward and have ashes put on our forehead, ashes that remind us that we are but dust and to dust we shall return. Ashes that remind us of our mortality and the brokenness of the human condition. Lent is the time to wallow in our sinfulness, to take a good, long, hard look at ourselves and see all the ways in which we are lacking. Right? Isn't that what Lent is about?

Or is it? As I sat there in the silence with the other clergy, I began thinking about what sin is. Sin occurs when we turn away from the abundant love of God. God is there all the time, loving us, pleased with us, willing reconciliation with us, and we just keep turning away. Lent isn't the time to focus on what bad people we are. It's a time to remember that we are the very good creation of God. It's a time to return to the loving God who creates us and redeems us. In Lent we are called to repent. The Greek word for "repent" is "metanoia" and means "to turn." We have turned away from God. By repenting we turn back to face God.

At the fall clergy conference, Bishop Sutton from Maryland was our guest speaker. He used a metaphor to describe our relationship with God that really captured my attention. He talked about God as light. Imagine a bright light in the center of the room. When we face the light, it shines on our faces, illuminates everything. But when we turn away from the light, our bodies get in the way of the light and we cast a shadow.

Our job is to keep facing the light, to keep our faces turned toward God. But the problem is that it feels backward to us. To keep our faces turned toward the light means that we can't look to see where we are going. We are walking backward, facing the light, and we just can't stand it. We have to turn and look where we're going, to be in control, to find our own way, and in doing so, we turn away from the light, we turn away from God. We can't trust that God will keep us on the path, steering us, caring for us. Instead we turn away from that steadfast love, that guiding light, and we make our own way. That is our sin.

When we turn away from the light, we forget that we are beloved of God because we can't see God anymore. We must repent and turn back to the Lord our God. We must, as Paul exhorts us, be reconciled to God. We do this in prayer. We do this in worship. We do this by listening in silence for God to speak in our hearts. We do this by asking forgiveness for the ways we have turned against God and by forgiving those who have turned against us. Lent is the time to "Blow the trumpet in Zion and sound the alarm on the holy mountain." It is the wake up call to remind us to turn back, not so that we can dwell on what miserable sinners we are but so that we can live in the abounding steadfast love that God shines on us.

The prophet Joel says, "Yet even now, says the Lord, return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning; rend your hearts and not your clothing. Return to the Lord, your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love." We are the beautiful, beloved children of God, even in Lent, even in the wilderness. God took care of the ancient Israelites when they were in the wilderness, even when they cried out and complained. God cares for us now, even when we turn away. God is abounding in steadfast love. Abounding in steadfast love. How can we not turn back?