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St. Thomas Church
Ash Wednesday
2.17.21

From Ashes to Easter

Normally Ash Wednesday marks the beginning of Lent but I am not sure that is true this year. I recently heard someone say, “This whole past year has been the Lentiest Lent I have ever Lented.” There is clearly a lot of truth in that statement. At any rate, it is not the Lent that most of us would choose. It reminds me of a comment made by the Episcopal Bishop of Missouri who recently visited a parish this last fall and noticed that they still had the interior of their church dressed in the purple of Lent. The parish, in his eyes, had experienced arrested development in the aftermath of the pandemic. It was like they were frozen in time.

And so, what I hope to offer are some observations and ideas that might help us enter a new chapter of our Lent that is ongoing: to enter with a kind of freedom that might liberate us from any arrested development that is still present with us and help us to reset and reboot as we prepare for Easter in a new way and recalibrate our spiritual compasses.

First a few words about giving things up. If Lent is traditionally about giving something up, I dare say, there is probably not one of us that hasn’t involuntarily given up something during this pandemic—sporting events, theater performances, haircuts, holiday celebrations with friends and family, travel, social events, volunteering, financial security, access to healthcare and even the sweet communion of the Eucharist.

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Fasting, and the kind of doing without that is imposed upon us, often triggers us emotionally and what follows is a type of grief reaction that can create the type of arrested faith development---an experience of being frozen in time-- like what the Bishop of Missouri observed. So, quite honestly, the thought of giving up more somethings for Lent is met, at least for me, with a bit of internal resistance—unless we are talking about fasting from fear, disappointment, and frustration. I don't know about you, but I am already hungry! I am hungry for hope—not only for myself, and my family but you, dear people of God, who join me in the solemn procession from ashes to Easter.

In today's gospel lesson we are presented with the traditional practices of piety and devotion that are characteristic of Christians in Lent: almsgiving, prayer, and fasting. All very important, however, today I would like to take a look at fasting from the perspective of what we have gone through this past year. Frequently our conversations around fasting in Lent have more to do with a type of dieting—consuming less of what we normally eat rather than examining if the food we are eating is healthy or not. And so, when you hear me talk about fasting today please also think about where the healthy food might be for you this Lent. Just like the Israelites who were kept alive by the daily arrival of heavenly manna, God too will nourish us with faith, hope, and love until we all arrive at a more promised land.

Let's talk about some of the best tasting food around that nourishes the soul. Let me point you to one of the best spiritual bakeries I know about--that creates some of the best spiritual bread I know: the annual

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St. Thomas' Lenten Devotional which has recently been published. I confess, I got access to this wonderful bread before most of you did.

True confessions, I didn't savor this bread. I gobbled it up in one sitting—I didn't realize how hungry for hope that I was and how much I needed to hear those stories of hope from all of you—thank you for sharing the creative ways you have been growing spiritually during these protracted months of perpetual Lent and grief for our nation and those who have completely lost hope of anything changing.

The involuntary fast brought on by the pandemic is a strong invitation to fast from self-absorption and individualism. With all of our losses this past year, it is so tempting to get stuck on how much we personally have lost and ignore the needs of others. While it is totally understandable, that we would be stuck there, the deeper treasure hidden in our losses is the opportunity to fast from the privileges that has kept us blind from seeing how those without privileges perpetually live.

The words of the prophet Isaiah rings in our ears with a volume and urgency that many have not heard before: "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 break every yoke? "The Easter promise always leads us to greater compassion for others. Already we see these promises beginning to be fulfilled as we move further away from hoarding toilet paper and move towards sharing precious resources—especially Covid-19 vaccine. One of the most beautiful examples of this when the Tulalip Tribe who, after experiencing a power outage, voluntarily opened their distribution centers to non-natives so the

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vaccine would not be wasted. They prioritized Marysville School Teachers. They went far beyond taking care of their own people. They modeled Christian charity and racial reconciliation at the same time!

I would like to highlight another call that this epidemic fasting has brought forth. This Lent, we are invited to fast from timidity. Isn't it true that the Episcopal Church is well known for doing amazing ministries and then not telling anyone about it? This kind of secret keeping is not what today's gospel lesson is talking about. Perhaps we Episcopalians have become far too good at remaining hidden. We need to see that there is a big difference between seeking publicity that is self-serving trumpet blowing highlighted in today's gospel reading and the visibility that gives hope to those who are marginalized and without as many resources.

In today's gospel lesson the emphasis is doing the interior work so when we are "eastering our way through Lent" we will feed and nurture the seeds of new life that will eventually bear Easter fruits in tangible, and very visual ways. We have received a wonderful opportunity for mission. In a recent survey of younger adults 35 and under, many indicated that the first thing they think of when they hear the word Christian are the two words judgmental and homophobic. This group is always on my mind as our daughter Rachel is in this age group. I remain deeply concerned that we of older generations will fail at passing on our faith to the next generation and, because of generational division, the younger generations won't be given the opportunity to pass on their hope for a better world to us.

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In an unprecedented way, due to technology, guests and visitors can now worship with us more freely and not be judged by what they wear, how they look, the kind of partner they love, the color of their skin, or simply prefer “to pray in secret” rather than in public. There are a lot of new doorways into our St. Thomas community and they need to stay open while we prepare to re-open the physical doors to our building. We also need to remember that technology does not open doors for everyone because of a lack of access. This is truly our most important Lenten discipline: open our hearts, open our doors!

In the post-Lenten recalibrated church that is emerging my hope is that we at St. Thomas would reaffirm our commitment to mission in general, more freedom from all the “isms” that harm people and reboot our Church’s mission to those wounded and excluded by organized religion and alienated from Christianity. Yes, we are called to easter our way through Lent: fasting from all that binds and oppresses, looking for the kind of heavenly food that will lead us to new life and will sustain us in our hunger for the hope that Easter promises us. Amen.