

SIMPLE LENT

Almighty and everlasting God, you hate nothing you have made and forgive the sins of all who are penitent: Create and make in us new and contrite hearts, that we, worthily lamenting our sins and acknowledging our wretchedness, may obtain of you, the God of all mercy, perfect remission and forgiveness; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. *Amen.*

From The Collect for Ash Wednesday, Book of Common Prayer, p. 264

ASH WEDNESDAY

JOEL 2:1-2,12-17, PSALM 103:8-22, 2 CORINTHIANS 5:20B—6:10, MATTHEW 6:1-6,16-21

FEBRUARY 14, 2018

ST. MARK'S-IN-THE-VALLEY

EPISCOPAL CHURCH AND PRESCHOOL

Los Olivos, California

THE REV. RANDALL C.K. DAY, D.MIN., PRIEST AND RECTOR

THE GOSPEL READING: MATTHEW 6:1-6, 16-21

Jesus said, "Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them; for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven. So whenever you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be praised by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your alms may be done in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you. And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you. And whenever you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces so as to show others that they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that your fasting may be seen not by others but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."

I hope you have a simple Lent.

Lent is often seen as a time of complex obligation that, no matter what you do, it isn't going to be enough. Like you're showing up for an in-law's birthday that is also

their anniversary, and your kids are acting out, and you are having your annual performance evaluation at work, and you haven't been to the gym in two months (or six), and your taxes are late, and the doctor's office called to say there's something "to discuss" from your

recent physical, and you forgot it was Valentine's Day, and, by the way, the world is going to hell in a hand basket and can't you do something about nuclear disarmament?

It isn't going to be enough.

Whatever complexity our lives have right now, no one needs Lent to ratchet up the pressure.

You can hear this in this gospel reading from Matthew – always the gospel reading for Ash Wednesday. Jesus is saying: “keep this simple” by starting off: “*beware* of practicing your piety before others....” It's not shaming, he's not saying that you're doing it wrong, he's just saying: “you don't need to do that.” It's too much work, too much stress to be sounding the trumpet before you, it's too much anxiety to care what others think of you. Then: “Oh, and also, you don't need to be stockpiling whatever you think you need for yourself to take care of yourself....”

I looked up the dictionary definition of “piety.” It's very alluring. “Reverence for God or devout fulfillment of religious obligations,” also “dutiful respect.” Delicious.

Does God *need* that? Does God *want* that? How do we even *do* that? If you think your boss is difficult to buy for at Christmas, how are you going make even a

dent in “fulfillment of religious obligations.” [We're seeing a lot of “fulfillment by Amazon” messages these days. Maybe they can take this on, too.]

“Beware of practicing your piety before others” indeed! Beware of practicing *your* piety **ever**.... It is not going to work out well. Or at all.

Fr. Richard Rohr writes: “Largely **ineffective moralism** has [...] dominated most organized religion—without any grounding or power from core identity.”

So Lent is usually an **invitation** to higher and deeper “ineffective moralism.” Write back and say you can't make it this year: already busy being ineffective in other areas.... Another time, perhaps....

Lent pushes us to “get back to God.” As in, look at the *bottom* of your “to do” list.... That item is still hovering there....

And that's where we run into core identity and what Fr. Richard calls “foundational illusion.” The foundational illusion is that we are separate from God.

We are **not** separate from God. Even if you feel separate from God you are not. You can't be. No one is.

Of course, if you were, how much time on the treadmill do you think it would take to fix that?

Our core identity is not inherent sinfulness as the church has often propounded to try to get our attention, our submission, yes, our conformity.

Our core identity is goodness, is being formed in the image and likeness of God's own self. Thomas Merton called it: "hidden in the love and mercy of God."

It is indelible. Indissoluble (my favorite word in the prayer book).

You, we, Lent or no, are *always* "hidden in the love and mercy of God."

Fr. Richard writes: "The great **illusion** that we must all overcome is that of **separateness**. Religion's primary task is to communicate **union, to reconnect people to their original identity 'hidden with Christ in God.'**" (Colossians 3:3)

He says: "Throughout much of the Bible 'sin' is *perceived* as an objective state and 'sinners' as a class of people. God's clear and specific job description is to undo separation: (1 John 3:2) 'My dear people, we are already the children of God; it is only what is in the future that has **not yet** been revealed, and then all we know is that **we shall be like God.**'"

So that is where we are ending up (no matter what we do or don't do this Lent). "We shall be like God" because that is what we

are – now and always.

But we hear a lot about sin in Lent – in the prayers and hymns and readings and teaching...

Fr. Richard writes about sin: "The word 'sin' as we now use it is very problematic. It shames, but it does not enlighten or invite, which means it does not really help or change people except perhaps at the level of conformity. Most of us associate 'sin' with personal naughty behaviors and individual moral unworthiness (i.e., as a **personal fault** more than a foundational illusion). I am not denying that if you have the foundational illusion, [if you **THINK** you are separate from God] you will certainly operate in a very selfish and sinful way—because [you think] that small self is now all that you have!"

What about the bad things we do or that happen around us and in the world? Fr. Richard, again: "What most people call 'sin' is more the *symptom* of sin, not the delusional state itself! It is this common state of *believed or chosen autonomy from God and others* that must be addressed. Our primary and self-destructive illusion is that we are separate and alone. This is the true basis, motivation, and loneliness that leads to all 'sin.'"

So, in your mind, this Lent, as we hear "sin," make the translation

to addressing our delusion that we are in any way separate from God, that we are separate and alone, substitute “self-destructive illusion” for the word that has lost its meaning. And defocus – quit fretting about or being preoccupied by – petty, naughty behaviors.

And if it’s behavior that concerns you, just imagine the impact on our actions and commitments if we utterly embrace our identity as people who embody God, in a world of people embodying God, whose primary identity is Great Compassion.

Recall Thomas Merton from his book *Seeds of Contemplation* (1945). Merton wrote: “To say that I am made in the image of God is to say that Love is the reason for my existence, for God is love. Love is my true identity. Selflessness is my true self. Love is my true character. Love is my name.”

How do we approach, how do we engage, what do we do when everyone else in the world, or in our world, in our neighborhood – when each person’s name is Love?

Keep Lent simple by simply recognizing God is God and never, ever distant. No holy “obligation,” no “practicing of piety” required.

And let me simply offer that you *deserve* Lent. You deserve this time of being absolutely enough, having some space and time for recognizing, re-engaging who you truly and deeply are as a child of God, as like God, as Love.

And, yes, have a holy Lent. Don’t skip it. But do things, or very intentionally do nothing, whatever truly brings you into consciousness of this sacred connection in love that we don’t have to make happen.

Have a simple Lent.



ST. MARK'S-IN-THE-VALLEY
EPISCOPAL CHURCH AND PRESCHOOL
Los Olivos, California

www.smitv.org