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A Holy Lent

Sermon preached by the Rev. Dr. Joseph S. Pagano on
 Ash Wednesday March 9, 2011

“I invite you therefore, in the name of the Church, to the observance of a holy Lent, by self-examination and repentance; by prayer, fasting, and self-denial; and by reading and meditating on God’s Holy Word.”

Every Ash Wednesday, we begin this holy season of Lent, by hearing this invitation. At its heart, this invitation is a call for us to discover our deepest and truest selves. It is a call to remember our original identity, created from the dust of the earth. It is a call to know ourselves in all our brokenness and limitation, to honestly acknowledge all the ways we have failed and fallen short of the glory of God. It is also a call to remember our baptismal identity, our true identity as the redeemed, renewed, and beloved children of God. It is a call to delve into the deepest mystery of our identities as loved and forgiven and renewed in the Paschal Mystery of Christ’s death and resurrection, to know ourselves in light of the very heart of God.

In order to do this, we are called in this Lenten season to become aware of and to turn away from everything that keeps us from our true identity, our true life in God. To discover our truest and deepest selves, we are called to a season of self-examination, repentance, fasting, self-denial, meditation, prayer, and the reading of scripture. These disciplines are not to be seen only as a matter of self-denial, but also, and more importantly, as a matter of self-discovery. It is the rhythm of the great truth that says we must die to the false self, so that our true selves may emerge. Sorrow and joy. Death and new life. Crucifixion and Resurrection.

Yet this journey of self-discovery will be difficult. In so many ways, Lent calls us to a way of life that runs counter to the beliefs and values of our world today.

In a world where love supposedly means never having to say you are sorry, we are called in this season of self-examination and penitence to humbly kneel before our Lord and Maker and to say we are sorry again and again.

In a world where there is a seemingly endless cycle of recrimination and violence, we are called to remember the deep truths of forgiveness and reconciliation and peace.

In a world of consumerism and conspicuous consumption, where the motto is *I consume therefore I am*, we are called into a season of fasting and self-denial.

In a world of instant messaging and twenty-second sound bites, we are called to be still and quiet, called to a season of deep meditation and prayer, reflection and silence.

In a world where everything says “new and improved,” we are called to study ancient texts, Holy Scriptures, to search for ancient wisdom and eternal truths.

In a world that tries to deny and hide human frailty and death, we are called to remember that we are dust and to dust we shall return.

In our world, to take on the disciplines of Lent, the disciplines of self-examination and penitence can feel like self-denial. Indeed, it can feel like death. And, in a certain sense, it is! It is part of the deep mystery at the heart of the Christian faith that says that in dying to the old self, we are being raised to new life. The paradox that says, if you seek to save yourself you will lose your life, but if you lose your life for the sake of the gospel you will be saved. The deep truth we find that when we walk in the way of the cross, we find it none other than the way of life and peace. The deep truth that, while our Lenten journey begins on Ash Wednesday, it ends on Easter Sunday, with the glorious promise of new and unending life in Christ.

Lent is a journey of discovery of our true selves. It is a call to remember our original identity as created out of the dust of the earth, lovingly fashioned by the very hand of God. It is a call to remember that we are also finite and flawed creatures, to remember all the ways we have fallen short of the full and abundant life God desires for us. Most importantly and most fundamentally, it is also a call to remember our Easter identities. It is a call to remember that in our baptisms we have been incorporated into the Paschal Mystery of Christ, that we have become new people in Christ. It is a call to remember that we come out of the waters of baptism in the sure and certain hope of sharing in the risen life of Christ.

Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return. We are creatures made of the very stuff and substance of the universe. We are stardust. We are fragile and flawed creatures. We have fallen short of the glory of God. We are creatures whose bodies will fail and who will die and who will return to the earth from which we came.

Remember also that you have been sealed by the Holy Spirit in Baptism and marked as Christ's own forever. We are God's beloved children. We have been forgiven and redeemed in the waters of baptism. We have been incorporated in the mystery of Christ's death and resurrection. We have been incorporated into the very life and heart of God. We are Easter people.

But this is still in so many ways an Ash Wednesday world, a world of pain and sorrow and brokenness.

We are Easter people living in an Ash Wednesday world.

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