

Sermon, Ash Wednesday, February 26, 2020, Jane A. Beebe

“Bless the Lord, O my soul, and all that is within me, bless his holy Name.” (Psalm 103:1)

The root of the word “Lent” is related to the word “length” and to the Old English word for spring: *lencten*. As I noted on Last Epiphany, the days are lengthening. In a few weeks spring returns. We become aware of more light at the beginning and at the end of the day. As we enter into this time of “lengthening,” I notice that, inexplicably, my shoulders relax a bit, I take a deep breath. This may seem an odd response to this season of turning and repentance. What if this season is not just one of lengthening days, but of a lengthening, an expansion within our souls? What if Lent is a blessing?

I love the fact that Episcopal liturgy intentionally includes acts of blessing. We bless God at the beginning of every service, and all the gathered people are blessed at the end. We bless those objects that aid our worship. In the very beginning of the story of God’s walk with God’s people in Genesis we hear God tell Abraham, “I will bless you... so that you will be a blessing.” (Genesis 12:2)

What is the purpose of blessing? Here is an insight I encountered a few years ago: Every seventh day we separate out a sabbath day, in order to remove ourselves from the physical work of the world and its demands, dedicating time to the work of the soul. Making an intentional blessing is essentially separating out

time before we consume, use, or enjoy something of the world in order to create a space for God to enter, for God's purposes to become apparent. (Prager, Rabbi Marcia. *The Path of Blessing*) Is not God not separating out time for us in these lengthening days?

Lent may seem a time when we try with our own efforts to bring God's blessings more within reach. In our anxiety, along with Joel we might wonder: "Who knows whether [God] will not turn and relent...?" Yet perhaps this season is more about what God does for us, what God has already done for us. It is in God's very nature to relent. Joel goes on to affirm that "...[God] is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and *relents* from punishing." (Joel 2:13) This is a God to whom we can return with confidence. This is a God who will receive us. In the words of that beautiful Daily Office collect: "Lord Jesus Christ, you stretched out your arms of love on the hard wood of the cross that everyone might come within the reach of your saving embrace..."

The Latin word *lentus* means flexible or pliant. To relent is to stay, stop, or delay. It may also mean to become less hard, to soften, to yield—even to dissolve or to melt. Ultimately it means to feel compassion. Perhaps Lent is a time for us to "re-lent" as well. Rending our hearts will not be so difficult or painful if they already softened. Joel shows us the connection between relenting and blessing. With God it is not a transactional process. God invites us into that blessing space,

that opened-out, lengthened space. In order to hear and see that invitation, however, we must turn and return time and again. Being human, this is not a one-time action! I invite you to consider what draws you, what draws you out, this Lent.

It is not surprising that one of Jesus' invitations to us is to pray. We are not meant to pray where we will be seen and lauded by others. Prayer, like blessing, does not seem to be about what happens on the surface of things. It is about whether our hearts are "in the right place," and whether they are open. Jesus tells us to go into our rooms and shut the door. To me this implies an interiority. There is a place for public, corporate worship as we are doing now. It is not a matter of what is better—it is all good!

However, the work of repentance, of "relenting," of making space for the God who generously makes space for us, requires an inward journey. Regularly going into our rooms and shutting the door also implies that we are setting aside the time and space necessary. Perhaps the very act of intentionality is a blessing, regardless of what we perceive the outcome to be. Our Father who sees us in secret is simultaneously our source and our reward.

This evening we have prayed an extraordinary Psalm: Psalm 103. Sometimes when I am walking or when I am about to fall asleep a line of Scripture will come into my mind—often from the Psalms. When I allow it to enter deeply

into my being, usually with repetition, I am sometimes led to what, in my limited awareness, is a deeper connection to God. This happened quite powerfully one time with the first line of this Psalm. “Bless the Lord, O my soul, and all that is within me, bless his holy Name.” (Psalm 103:1)

In English translation of the Psalm we have the word soul. However, the Hebrew word has the sense of the whole of one’s inner being, not a soul that is separate from the body. I began to have the sense that “all that is within me” could somehow bless God’s holy Name. *All* parts of me: my limbs, my brain, my heart and other inner organs, the blood in my veins, the breath in my lungs. Every cell was able, perhaps even yearned to bless God. Then it occurred to me that even the parts I did not like or found hard to acknowledge: difficult memories, images of those I needed to forgive, those I didn’t yet know I needed to forgive, scars physical and emotional, those, too, could bless God’s holy Name. Even the tiniest of particles that I cannot see with my eye that make up my cells: electrons, protons, neurons, and quarks could bless God’s holy Name.

“God knows whereof we are made; he remembers that we are but dust.” It is with all those minute particles of dust that we can bless God. In the process, God shapes those particles, breathes into us, and gives us life, not just once, but over and over again. May the ashes we receive on our foreheads remind us of God’s life-giving presence, that we are blessed.

