

Jesse Perkins
Tuesday, February 16, 2021
Year B Ash Wednesday

[Isaiah 58:1-12](#)
[2 Corinthians 5:20b-6:10](#)
[Matthew 6:1-6,16-21](#)

“Selling ice in the arctic, giving away sand in the desert...
and asking a hungry person to fast”

- As I stand here today, I admit that inviting you to a Holy Lent feels a lot like that
 - You know, last year we celebrated Shrove Tuesday with waffles, and began our Ash Wednesday together much like we have every year
 - And almost every year of my ministry I have encouraged parishioners to actually give up something
 - It is because, honestly, we as Americans consume so much, have so much, waste so much, compared to the rest of the world
 - That I have always thought it was good for me, and for most of us, to deprive ourselves of something
 - Because otherwise we would not experience that
 - It is not universally true in the pews of the Episcopal Church, I know,
 - But for the majority of us denying ourselves is a tried and tested way to make room for the holy in our hearts and souls during Lent
 - Making room, by eliminating something for a time
 - To long for something beyond our reach, even by choice, to become more aware of our soul's longing for God
 - And all of that is still, I believe, fantastic spiritual disciplines that come down through the centuries
 - And while it may not be a one-size-fits-all kind of thing, still not a bad thing to try
 - But this year, I think we need to reconsider our approach to Lent
 - Because if you are like me, I am not sure last year's Lent has actually ended yet.
 - And the winter only makes it worse!
 - I remember sometime in March, Bishop Lee telling the clergy that what we were to give up this year was worship, was sacrament
 - Was in-person connection, relationship, and fellowship
 - And we are still doing it.
 - Asking you to fast this year is like asking a hungry person to eat less.

- Selling ice and giving away sand when there is too much of it around already
- And yet, our deepest need, our longing for a connection with the God who created us, persists and is maybe ever more increased
- Maybe, within this imposed Lent of sorts over the last 11 months, we are now especially aware of just how much we need God
 - And each other
- Our New Testament reading this year more than any other year really brought this home to me
 - This letter one fo the seven letters believed to have been written by St. Paul himself ¹
 - He speaks to the hardship he has experienced, and certainly the struggles experienced by the earliest of Christians
 - They have endured “great endurance, afflictions, hardships, calamities, beatings, imprisonments, riots, labors, sleepless nights, and hunger”
 - Just to name a few
 - This was likely written during the time of the Neronian Persecutions, where Emperor Nero was particularly cruel
 - Some historians suggest he blamed the great fire in Rome on the Christians,
 - Possibly as a way to deflect an accusation that he had set the fire himself! ²
 - Christians became the scape goat, and he justified all kinds of terrible violence on Jews and Christians alike
 - And yet through it all they still found the gifts of the Spirit- purity, knowledge, patience, kindness, genuine love, truthful speech
 - He concludes that they were treated as imposters and yet were true
 - Unknown, and yet well known
 - Dying, yet alive
 - Sorrowful, and yet rejoicing, having nothing, and yet possessing everything
 - Back a few verses before our reading today, Paul says that Christians are to live not for themselves, but for Christ who died and was raised for them
 - I will admit, in years past I have always interpreted this as an admonition to focus on giving something up, as the traditional Lent
 - To focus less on “living for myself”

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pauline_epistles

² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Persecution_of_Christians#Neronian_persecution

- But this year, I want us to focus on what Paul has retained in spite of all that has been taken away
- I want us to focus on the living part.
- Focus on where God has been in our lives
- Even as our situation most likely does not reach the same level of hardship as Paul and the persecuted Christians experienced
- Our own 11 month long journey in the wilderness has not been easy on any of us
- How do we follow in St. Paul's footsteps to find ourselves able to live into a life in which we already possess everything of value
- What should we embrace today for our Lenten disciplines?
- How do we find the hope and peace within a fast we did not chose?
- This year, perhaps we start by looking for something good and unexpected that has come out of this
 - And try and nurture and grow it
 - Search for the tiny spark of joy that God has given, and embrace it
 - Maybe you have found a new hobby, or had valuable time with your family
 - Maybe you have grown more intentional about your phone calls and Zooms with family and friends far away
 - If nothing else, perhaps this past year has given us a new perspective on life and just how precious and fragile it is
 - And has refocused us on what is truly important
 - You have my permission, should you even need it, to embrace prayer, joy and gratitude this year as your Lenten discipline
 - To tend to your soul in healthy ways
 - And use that as a way to connect with God through thanksgiving
 - Taking time to refill the tank with God and our most important relationships can renew our energy and purpose
- And if that is not quite what you have in mind, and you want to go a more traditional route in terms of a fast
 - I commend you for it- maybe you feel the time has come to "clean house"
 - So dig deep, take stock, fast and pray
 - While you are giving up something you enjoy, or enjoy too much
 - Listen to the words of the prophet Isaiah
 - "Fast with a purpose"
 - Isaiah says that the kind of fast the Lord desires is one that make you more aware of injustice and oppression
 - And strengthen to loose the bonds and let the bound go free

- To take your craving for chocolate, candy, cokes, coffee, wine- whatever it is that you have given up
- And to allow it to make you more compassionate to those who hunger, and who need clothing, and who are poor and live without all the time
- Allow God to change your perspective, increase your gratitude, and grow your compassion
- Take an inventory of where your energy is going, what and how much you are consuming,
- How much are you giving away in terms of time, talent, and treasure
- And how does that compare to what God is asking you?
- How can you return some balance to your life when so much has been changed?
- However you choose to embrace Lent this year,
 - Give alms and time, but not so anyone else knows
 - Pray, but not to be seen
 - Fast, but make sure it is about God and God's presence in your life
 - Finally, , as Jesus says, store up treasures that are truly important
 - For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also...
 - So choose your treasure wisely
 - And most of all remember that even during Lent, God know you and love you, and delights in you
 - Even during Lent
 - You see, Lent is really just for us, we are the ones that need it, God does not need Lent
 - God is there all the time ready to reward any and all efforts to live more fully into the Christian life God is calling you into.
 - Lent is *our* annual reminder that doing so takes intentionality and effort, and we even have a few strategies from our Tradition to help us along the way
 - But any Lent that ends up making us more aware of God in our lives, and more aware of our fellow children of God who are around us
 - And more focused on God's joy, peace, and love in the midst of any and all suffering
 - Any Lent that calls us to a greater focus on the things that are bigger than ourselves-
 - That is a Holy Lent.
- My friends, this gift of life that we have... it is precious, fragile, and goes by way too fast
 - Remember that you are dust... one day it will be said for each of us at the end of our lives

- To take on this Lent, in whatever way seems best for you, in whatever way refocuses you on the reason you are here on this Earth
- Take the next six weeks to really focus on what is truly important
- To be reminded of what God dreams for you and your life, and for us
- And to walk more closely with the God who created you, and the God who will one day when this life ends, welcome you home.

Amen.