

## **Ash Wednesday March 6 2019**

### **Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21**

My two favorite seasons in the church year are Lent and Advent. On the surface, it's because of their colors; Royal Blue and Purple. Deep rich colors that come about in a time of year when there isn't much color out in the world.

I also like them because I am a bit of a contrarian. Christmas seems to start earlier each year. There were decorations etc. out before Halloween this past year. There was Easter candy out before Valentine's day. Our commercial culture doesn't promote patience or the need to go through the process. Advent and Lent are dedicated to waiting and the journey. They each acknowledge our natural human inclination to avoid the difficult; whether that is just waiting for the good thing to happen or to spend intentional time walking the path. To go through the process of Maundy Thursday and the last supper, the agony of the trial and crucifixion. The waiting and mourning of Holy Saturday before we get to the joy of Easter.

I like these seasons because they interrupt my normal life. Because they are a chance for me to stumble over my faith every day. There are any number of ways this can happen. Daily devotions that count down

the days (23-25 in Advent, 40 in Lent). Mid-week services that focus on a theme for that season.

In this way Lent might be my favorite season because Lent is particularly good for this. Now, most folks tend to talk about Lent as a time where we take on the burden of something extra. We give something up, we beat ourselves over the head with a wet noodle focusing on our sins and the ways in which we fall short of the glory of God. And there is a place for that.

But I have always seen Lent more as an opportunity and that is the main thing I like about this season. I also think that is part of what Jesus is getting at in our text today. Martin Luther would have liked how this text talks about how we live out our faith. It warns, “beware of making your piety a spectator sport”. If you are posting online about what you’ve given up for Lent, how much you’ve donated to someone’s birthday charity drive, posting the hottest bible memes and doing so with the intent for folks to be impressed, well you’ve gotten your reward (other people are impressed by you). But, if what you really want is to grow; then just do it and don’t make a big deal of it. Martin Luther echoes Jesus, if you are doing these things to get brownie points with God or to impress your neighbor with your righteousness, then the

only benefit you get is the applause of your neighbor. These do nothing for our relationship with God.

However, you can take advantage of this peculiar time that is the season of Lent and remove something from your life that might be at risk of becoming like a god to you. You can take advantage of this time to grow in your faith. To begin or improve your habit of praying. To try a fast from something- not as a form of self-denial, but so that you might better hear God, see God, find God in your everyday life. I know folks who will take a social media fast. Who will fast from TV, or YouTube. I know folks who will fast from fast food, or sweets, because it gives them a greater appreciation for the fact that it brings them closer to trusting that God provides what they need. It gives them a sense of better stewarding this wonderfully made body they have been given.

I like Lent because it is the “excuse” if you need it; to develop better faith habits; to try being more charitable in your giving, to try and spend time with God in prayer just a little bit more, to try and learn your family history by reading the Bible a little more. I like Lent because it reminds us we do these things not because they will make you more righteous in other people’s eyes, but because they will draw you closer to the God who claimed you. They can give you fresh eyes to

see the God who is active in your life, now. Who is present with you now. Who cries with you in your sorrow and hurt, now. Who is present in the face of the person who is thirsty and you give them something to drink, hungry and you feed them, in need of love and you care for them.

The promise in the text is, when you do these things in secret, not as a performance for others, but as part of who we are in this season of life, God will see you and you will be restored. The payback we get is in becoming more fully who God has created us to be. What a gift that is!

I like Lent because it is not about what I do, but about what God does in me. But, like all good things, it isn't something that you are meant to be done on your own. That's another reason I like Lent, because it is something I can do with others, be accountable to with others. It's like when I first started working out in college. I had an upperclassman who was my workout partner and knowing that he would be up and ready to go at 7:00 am meant that even on those mornings when I wasn't really up for it, I went...because he was waiting.

During Lent, we take an intentional time to add some extra study. We do it as a community, as small groups, as families so that we might have that extra little incentive to participate. Plus, it's always more fun to do these things in a group.

I like Lent, because it reminds me that as a follower of Christ I do live in a different way. It bumps me up against my faith more often as I take that extra 10-15 minutes a day to pray, to read, to reflect, to converse with other believers. It trips me up because I'm in worship on Wednesday and Sunday. It reminds me that my life as a follower of Jesus is not just a performance I put on once a week. But is a part of my identity every day of the week.

I like Lent, because all too often my cry to God is "I believe, help my unbelief". Lent is a way in which the seed of faith which has been planted in me by the Holy Spirit through the waters of baptism and the Word of God embodied in Jesus Christ is strengthened and grows.

I like Lent, because it is an intentional time to stop, ponder, think, about who I am in relationship to God, to others. About the ways in which I have not lived up to the fullness of who God created me to be, of who I want to be. To admit the ways in which I have failed others, hurt others, sinned against God. To hear again very clearly from God; for the sake of my Son Jesus, I forgive you. Go and sin no more.

I like Lent, because during this season life is fuller, deeper for me. Because it is filled with serious things, but also many things to be thankful for.

I invite you into this journey of Lent, one that may hold other joys for you, but also one in which you have the opportunity to grow. I invite you to join us as we walk with Jesus on that road to Jerusalem and the cross. To take the journey without any shortcuts, and to see what you might learn. I invite you to join us in our journey through Martin Luther's Small Catechism as we seek to gain a better grasp on these basics of our Christian faith. To strive together to see how this little document might change our lives. I invite you to join us on this journey of Lent as we look for the ways God will restore us more fully into who God has created us to be. As we grow; in faith towards God, love to one another, and generosity to all.