

Rev. Timothy M. Crummitt

Ash Wednesday - Year C

St. Paul's Lutheran Church

Joel 2:1-2, 12-17

Isaiah 58:1-12

Psalms 51:1-17

2 Corinthians 4:20b-6:10

Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

### **Gospel**

The Holy Gospel according to St. Matthew

[Jesus said to the disciples:] <sup>1</sup>“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.

<sup>2</sup>“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. <sup>3</sup>But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, <sup>4</sup>so that your alms may be done in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

<sup>5</sup>“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. <sup>6</sup>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.

16“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. 17But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, 18so 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.

19“Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; 20but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. 21For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”

The Gospel of our Lord

### **Prayer**

Let us pray,

Amen

### **The Lenten Struggle**

Good evening! I have a love/hate relationship with Lent. When it comes to giving up something for Lent, or adding some other faith practice, my success rate has been sporadic. For most of my life I didn't even give anything up. It seemed to me that God probably wasn't interested in watching me give up something like chocolate. I had, and still do to some extent, believed that what we sacrifice in Lent should be something big, something about ourselves that is foundational. The first time I gave up anything for Lent was during internship when I gave up alcohol. I love a good beer, and I was able to make it till Easter without breaking my promise. I forget what, or if, I did anything two years ago, but last year was pretty hard. I was part of a Lenten Facebook group and was

responsible for posting a text for each day along with a short sentence or two reflection. I also decided to try and exercise every other day and to meditate for at least 15 minutes every day. And it's here that I ran into the hate part of my relationship with Lent.

I wasn't able to do it. Some days I was just so tired that I didn't exercise. Sometimes I kept putting off meditation further and further into the evening and then just forgetting. The group posts were tough too. I'm not really on social media much and so I had to actively remember to get on and post something! So there I was at the end of Lent, feeling even worse than when I started, convinced that I was a horrible person. Maybe you have felt this way in your faith life too, it's as if we build up this wonderful picture of what our lives will be like once we do this thing, and then once we fail, we end up feeling like horrible people, or worse, we just give up.

The past few weeks have been busy ones here in the office, and so I've come into Lent more tired than I have ever been before. It wasn't boding well for my Lenten outlook. Which got me thinking... what is the right way to approach Lent? How should we enter this season of the Church year?

For me, Lent has always been somber. The Catholics are normally associated with the whole religious guilt thing, but in my experience, the Lutheran denomination gives them a run for their money. This mindset influences a great many things, but most especially the flow and content of worship. The service is simpler, more somber. But somber doesn't mean guilt... Have I been looking at Lent the wrong way all this time? As I prepared for this sermon over the last couple days there was far less preparing, and much more avoiding. But then today as I was processing my feeling regarding Lent I decided that maybe the sermon should be about that very struggle! Which brings us to a

history lesson. If I was going to understand my own feelings, my understanding of Lent needed to be strengthened.

So, turning to James F. White's *Introduction to Christian Worship*, I read the following: "*The origins of Lent are controversial.*" Well that's certainly a good way to start off, I was intrigued. "*It was customary to think that Lent originated as the final intensive period of preparation for those catechumens (converts under training) who had been set apart, after considerable preparation, to be baptized at the Easter Vigil. New evidence shows a possibly earlier stand, a post-Epiphany fast of forty days in Egypt.*" Clearly, my idea of controversy and worship historian's ideas are vastly different. He continues: "*The council of Nicea, A.D. 325, first referred to Lent as forty days and made it immediately precede Easter... By Augustine's time, Lent... had become a time of preparation for all Christians, baptized or not.*"<sup>1</sup> So it's a time of preparation for all Christians... A few pages later he summarizes the time writing that "*the Season of Lent is the season in which we participate in that final trip to Jerusalem and the self-giving nature of love shown in Christ's passion and death. All is changed as Christ gives himself to us...*"<sup>2</sup>

It was that summary that helped me bring things into a closer focus. As we follow Jesus along in his journey to Jerusalem, to the cross, we use this season as a time of preparation and anticipation. We witness the love of Christ as he marches to his death.

Like much in life, Lent changed over time. *Keeping Time*, a worship resource written by Augsburg Fortress, writes that by the medieval period, "*Lent became a forty*

---

<sup>1</sup>White, James F. *Introduction to Christian worship*. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2000. p. 56.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, p. 69.

*day period of penance for all Christians. Records suggest that in some places a rigorous fast in both food and sexual activity was preached... The whole of Lent carried the biblical focus of the passion of Christ, which was seen as necessitated by personal sinfulness.*<sup>3</sup> Those darn medieval priests! That's where the guilt came from! The book continues: *"In the twentieth century came a reevaluation of Lent. An emotional focus on the passion... did not correspond well... and for many people fasting had become so minimal that it had little meaning. Thus Lent... resembles more the fourth century than the fourteenth... Lent is this preparation for... baptisms as well as for the annual renewal in baptism for all Christians."*<sup>4</sup>

All of this is interesting, but what do we do with it? I'm glad you asked! Because it's here that I began to come to a clearer understanding of how I should approach the season of Lent. One final quote: *"There are three classic Lenten disciplines: giving of alms to the poor, praying, and fasting. Congregations may elect to focus their monetary gifts towards some specific need of those who are needy and suffering. Many congregations urge more regular prayer by providing daily devotional guides and by scheduling midweek services. Some contemporary Christians adopt a Lenten menu that limits the type of food eaten. Some curtail the amount and expense of personal entertainment. Such attention to one's pattern of self-indulgence can have several different intents: to bond us with those who suffer; to allow for more money*

---

<sup>3</sup> Ramshaw, Gail, and Mons Teig. *Keeping Time: The Church's Years*. Minneapolis, Minn: Augsburg Fortress, 2009. p. 84.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, p. 84.

*for alms; or to prepare our bodies and our minds for the fullness of the Easter celebration by practicing its contrast.”<sup>5</sup>*

BOOM! It's that last one that got me. The purpose of Lent isn't to suffer, it's a very real reminder of the reality BEFORE our baptisms. It turns out that I had been practicing Lent the right way all along. Through my many mistakes and failures I had succeed in feeling defeated and hopeless, which is kind of the point! On our own, we can't do anything to save ourselves from sin. We fail because it's the reality of our lives post-Fall. Lent isn't about me or you at all. Lent isn't really about Lent either. Lent is about God's sacrifice on a cross on the outskirts of Jerusalem. A sacrifice we spend the next forty days trying to understand. Amen.

---

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, p. 85.