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Ash Wednesday

The Rev. Laurel Coote
St. Dunstan's Episcopal Church

In their book, Good Enough, 40-ish Devotionals for a Life of Imperfection, Kate Bowler and Jessica Richie write about Lent: the 40 days leading up to Easter that mirrors the 40 days Jesus spent in the wilderness; and a 4th century Christian practice of preparation for the holiest day of the year.

And so, here we are. We have come. But for what have we come? What is Lent, for us, and why enter into it?

Perhaps we come because we know inherently that we, in our humanness, are broken, imperfect, and always in need of God's love and redemption. Maybe we come, uncertain of exactly what Lent is, or what it asks of us, or how we are to respond, and yet, we want to try. Others of us may come because Lent is part of the rhythm of our lives as Episcopalians, and is the next season into which we step, the next invitation from God to go deeper. Whatever it is that brought you here today, I am glad that you came, and I look forward to sharing this Lenten journey with you.

Our lessons and prayers today are filled with many words and images, warnings and invitations. We hear words from the prophet Joel and the Psalmist about God's most profound attributes: compassion, mercy, slowness to anger and great kindness. Words that describe the kind of God we all want and need. We see images of God as a parent who nurtures his children, as the one who is waiting patiently for us to return, one who rather than punish us, seeks to reconcile and forgive us. These are images of the God of Love, who loves us, and who asks of us, love.

We hear also warning and urgency: A plague of locusts has covered the land of Judah, and it is in the face of this trauma and the hardship that will follow, that Joel speaks on behalf of God. He begins, as if with the shout of a trumpet, as he calls them to return to God; as he assures them that God in compassion and with mercy, awaits them, is ready to welcome them, and will, one day, restore them.

If we turn to our Gospel, there we hear as Jesus instructs his disciples about how best to practice acts of giving, praying and fasting. He notes their importance and value, for each were an integral part of the practice of Judaism. What is of particular concern to Jesus is the why, and for whom? Although our intentions may be honorable, or our motivations clear, it is easy for us to get off track. It can feel good when we are acknowledged for our generosity, or when others commend us for our ability to keep a spiritual practice. And it's not that such acknowledgement is inherently bad. It's just that when we come to seek, or thrive on, or to require such accolades as justification or affirmation that we are doing good, we have lost sight of the God who always sees us and affirms us.

The Psalmist reminds us that the Lord knows whereof we are made; he remembers that we are but dust. God sees us as we are, and love us still. We are human, mortal, fallible, and in the most profound sense, temporary. Our lives are finite, as much as we live them as if they were not. But rather than allow this truth about ourselves to dishearten us, the invitation is to choose to embrace the lives we have and to live them as generously and lovingly as we can in the time that we have. As followers of Jesus, the invitation goes one step further: That every day of our lives, we come to God to express our love and praise, and that we set for ourselves the intention that all we offer and all we do is given in service of Love. Love of God. Love of Neighbor. Jesus tells us that when we do this, God meets us in those secret places, and there basks in all that we are and have done.

On this Ash Wednesday, we gather and ask God to show us the world as it is. We listen as God's Word directs us to look inward, to examine ourselves with a discerning eye. And then, with the same compassion and mercy that God extends to us, we are called to love and forgive ourselves, and to begin anew. Yes, the reality of our finitude will be rubbed on our foreheads — reminding us that from dust we were made, and to dust we shall return. Knowing and holding this truth about ourselves and one another somehow breaks down the barriers that keep us apart. It is the great equalizer.

Lent calls us to embark upon the great descent — the walk toward the cross. It is a journey that we are invited to take individually and as a community. Along the way, we are certain to be reminded that life is so very beautiful, and life is so very hard. For everyone.

So, what is God inviting you into this Lenten season? Just asked last night what I would be giving up for Lent, my response was that in general, I am a person who prefers to take on things, rather than give them up. Something about the context of “giving up” feels for me like deprivation, while the adding of a practice or ritual, feels more life-giving. The thing is, whether we choose to empty ourselves of that which doesn’t serve us, i.e.: give up something, or to fill ourselves with good things that do serve us, “taking on”, doesn’t really matter. What matters is our intention. And the intention at the heart of Lent is one of creating time, space and opportunity to be in relationship with God. We may not know how best to do this, or even where to begin. And that is perfect.

One broad suggestion offered by Kate Bowler in her book is that we commit to and practice a regular pattern of activity or activities during Lent, because such activities become more valuable over time, and their structures create a space for good things. Now, for some of us the thought of a structured practice of prayer—or writing, or reading, or gardening, or any other action that might draw us closer to God— might elicit enthusiasm, might sound comforting and totally doable. We may be people who thrive on routine and regularity. For others of us, though, the rigors of what we perceive as a highly scheduled life can leave us feeling trapped, confined and unable to express ourselves freely. It takes away the spontaneity of connecting with God. And for some, we may almost crave a tight regimen of rules, only to suddenly lose momentum, or decide that the cost is too high. Employing such regular rules of prayer and service is the life work of monastics.

Saint Benedict had high hopes for the spiritual community he founded until his rules were deemed so unnecessarily strict that his followers tried to poison him! Don’t worry, he survived. And simmered down a bit. Benedict’s main achievement became a set of rules that enshrined a spirit of moderation and balance, with the intention that none of the rules be harsh or burdensome, but rather that in them is created the space in which to follow and love God with great joy.

If the Lenten practice you choose begins to feel heavy, like a burden, then perhaps it is time to try on a different one. Don’t worry about getting it right, or doing it perfectly. Just commit to trying. Every day. And see what happens.

This is a blessing for a beginning of a new spiritual practice:

Blessed are we who are trying a new thing, though we can’t quite see the whole of it.

That’s the beauty of the life of faith.

We start in the middle, at the heart center of an unspoken desire
to live into the glimpse we’ve had of You and of Your Goodness.

Blessed are we who ask You to be the guide as we begin to build

From here and create stronger, more flexible rules of life.

Trusting that you are trying to foster life in us.

Blessed are we who remember that we will fall short.

We will fail, but that doesn’t mean we are ruined.

We simply pick up and begin again.

Blessed are we, willing to be beginners all over again.