

The Rev. Wayne Nicholson
St. John's Episcopal Church, Mount Pleasant
10th February, 2008
Lent 1
Genesis 2:15-17; 3:1-7
Matthew 4:1-11

Psalm 32

Romans 5:12-19

Blessed Lord, lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil, so that we may behold your love face to face. *Amen.*

I heard a story from St. Bartholomew's Church in Manhattan. It seems that there was a person who chose Ash Wednesday for her one and only appearance of the year. Now some of you may know that St. Bart's stands at the corner of Park Avenue and 51st Street, the epicenter of Manhattan's remarkable concentration of wealth, power, business and entertainment. One Ash Wednesday morning the priests had begun the ritual of smearing ashes on the foreheads of worshippers with the solemn words, "dust you are, and to dust you shall return" (Genesis 3:19), when a beautiful young woman, impeccably dressed, came forward and knelt at the altar. The young woman was visibly nervous, and as she knelt the priest realized she wanted to speak. As he leaned forward to trace a cross of ashes on her forehead, she whispered, "Father, I am a model. I am perfectly fit, I have no wrinkles. My body is my life and my work. But I know I only have it for a few years, then I will be too old for this work. My body is aging, and I can hardly admit it to myself. But once a year, I do it at this service. So rub the ashes on. Rub them hard."

For me, this is a poignant picture of our world. We live for youth; we live for unwrinkled skin and svelte bodies. We live for immortality... and we generally deny death.

But during the season of Lent - and perhaps particularly so on Ash Wednesday, we are reminded that we come from dust, from the earth, and to that earth we all shall return. The ashes of Wednesday symbolize that beginning and that end - and the woman takes this opportunity each year to acknowledge her own mortality. Well, once a year isn't a bad start.

There was the assumption that God would allow Adam and Eve to live in paradise forever if they played their cards right, and God had warned them not to eat of the Tree of Knowledge - the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. "For in the day that you eat of it you shall die..." God drew a line in the sand: "Human beings on this side, God on this side. Tree of life on your side, tree of knowledge of good and evil on my side. Stay on your own side of the line if you know what's good for you."

Ah. The old "line in the sand" trick.

Satan knew the trick. And Satan knew how to use it. Satan knew all about temptation, and he used just one line only to tempt Eve: "You will not die." Perhaps the greatest temptation of all. Eve bit into the fruit, and, as we know, Adam did the same, and the rest...is the fate of humankind. To die.

Religion is a tricky thing. The theologian and pastor Richard Niebuhr said, "People want a God without wrath who has brought people without sin into a kingdom without judgment by a Christ without a cross." We want a sanitized life. A life without disease, without the need for Botox, and yet if we are realistic, if we are honest with ourselves, we know that it's just not possible.

And so each year we pause in a particular season as a reality check. Lent. A time for reflection. A time of giving up of the things that separate us from one another and from God, a time when our awareness of our own mortality is brought into stark daylight by the liturgy and the prayers. A time when we re-learn that for the really critical aspects of living, we must trust in God Not in our own immortality.

This isn't meant to be a morbid time. Lent isn't supposed to be all sackcloth and ashes. Because even though it is a quieter time - a time without the Alleluias, a time without the Gloria - it is more like a mystery. And what lifts us up, what keeps us from total depression is that we know the end of the story. We've already read the last few pages. We live into the mystery of Lent with the assurance that there is a glorious end. We live into the mystery of Lent with our confession and our penitence and our sorrow for the truly rotten things we have done - with the full knowledge that God forgives. That God loves. That God embraces us, warts and all.

During Lent, though, we have an opening into the window of our soul, and we are encouraged to look at our hearts through the eyes of God

Frederich Buechner suggests that during Lent we might ask ourselves a few questions.

First, When you look in the mirror, what do you see you most like... what do you see that you most deplore? Do you like your body, a gift from God? Do you like how you treat your co-workers, or your family? Do you like how you treat yourself?

Second, If you knew that you were to die very soon, what last message would you like to give to a handful of the people who are most dear to you - in twenty-five words or less? Would they be words of apology? Of encouragement? Of joy?

Would they be words of love? Of faith? In twenty-five words or less it would be difficult to summarize your entire life – but what could you pass on that would help each and every one of them live their lives better?

Third. Which thing you have done would you most like to undo? Oh, Lordy, that's a tough one. I've got a pretty long list – what would I chose? Sharp words given in annoyance – words that stung. Not listening. Not hearing. Not forgiving. Sins of things done and of things left undone. God doesn't want us to wallow in guilt – in fact, our sense of guilt or shame over such things should be at the top of the list of things we give up for Lent – after we've made our confession and perhaps restitution and have repented: "I will do my best, with God's help, never to do that thing again." But it's not a bad exercise to reflect: What in my life do I wish I had not done?

Fourth, What person or cause would you die for? Wow, that's a tough one, too! I'm not the bravest person in the world. When I consider the lives of martyrs for our faith, I wonder how much pain I could endure, how much physical torture, and still willingly confess my love of God? Or my faith in Christ crucified? Then again, if I saw my sister about to step into a place of sure danger, would I put my own life at risk? I hope so, but... the question certainly persists.

And last, perhaps the most difficult of all: If this were the last day of your life, what would you do? Would I indulge myself of worldly pleasures – eat several pints of Ben & Jerry's, have some excellent caviar, go to a spa for a massage? Or would I try to visit the people dear to me to tell them, "I love you." I don't want to sound overly pious, but I actually think I would gather them together and celebrate the Eucharist. Because for me, it would be one final reminder that I need not fear death. That because of Jesus Christ death is no more. Worldly death may come, but our faith tells us that we are reborn into the love of God. And if I were facing the last day of my life, I would probably need that assurance.

Buechner has asked us good questions, and I suggest to you that it would be an interesting – and soul-catching – exercise to adopt them as a Lenten discipline, perhaps one for each week of Lent.

Because acknowledging our own earthly mortality can help us live better lives *today*. Savoring each moment. Loving someone more deeply. Caring for someone with more compassion. Taking joy in God's magnificent creation. Taking Lent as a kind of spiritual retreat, a season of the spirit where we look into our own soul, intentionally opening our selves up to the eyes of God

It's not a gloomy or morbid thing to do, it's a spiritually *healthy* thing to do. Self-examination, repentance – they not only prepare us to see God face-to-face, but they help us to see *ourselves* face-to-face. And to make the most of each moment in time.

We do it not because of a macabre fascination with death, but because of a joyous fascination with *life*. We do it not in fear of death, but in steadfast hope and assurance that God loves us.

A friend of mine was assigned the duty of visiting congregations in turmoil. Each week he would visit a new congregation, listen to the voices that clamored to be heard, settle small disputes and arrange for heartfelt conversations among those who had big problems. In the morning he'd get in his car. He was tense. It was a stressful job, being referee and facilitator between conflicting groups of people. But each morning as he settled in his driver's seat, he would relax his hands on the steering wheel with the prayer, "I will be with you in heaven. I will be with you in heaven." And that worked.

Face the stress. Face conflict. Face inner turmoil and outward pressure. Do it all with the assurance: You will be with God in heaven. You will be with God in heaven. Pray that prayer, face life and death, and live the best you can. Opportunity knocks once, but temptation leans on the doorbell – avoid it with prayer. Don't play the victim. And remember: that God will provide you with strength. And God will provide you with love. Jesus Christ wrestled with temptation – we can, too. And with God's help, we can win.

Amen.