

Ash Wednesday sermon
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February 22, 2023

We gather every year, a small-ish group of us, to begin Lent together. What we do here, and in fact, that we are here at all, is not very Presbyterian. Presbyterians rejected all that “Catholic stuff” at the Reformation, including the observance of seasons like this one.

But! John Calvin held that we should indeed pray every day, and fast, and be disciplined in our faith and its actions. John Calvin was Mr. Discipline! So he would agree, I think, given our world, that what we do here is acceptable.

And even if he does not agree, Jesus does!

Ash Wednesday marks the beginning of the season of penitence. This has not always been a popular Protestant theme. In our day, it is mostly not popular at all. Who wants to do it? Who wants to make Christianity harder?

This isn't new. Back in the mid-19th century, Kierkegaard wrote that since all of his contemporaries were striving to make Christianity easier, he would dedicate his writing to making it harder. It has always been thus.

What does a season of penitence mean?

It means recognizing that we are in need of a savior, that we are sinners. We are guilty of the sin we commit: whatever fails to obey the law of God, that is a sin. So, have we been angry? Sin. Have we been jealous? Sin. Have we been hateful or cunning or deceitful or self-satisfied? Sin. You get the idea.

So we pray and ask Jesus to forgive our sin. And Jesus does. So far, so good. We leave the church, and Monday, we commit the same sin again. And Tuesday, Wednesday, maybe not on Thursday, then Friday, Saturday. And we go to church on Sunday, and ask Jesus to forgive our sin. He does! But the cycle continues.

God is endlessly forgiving, but God calls us to change, not simply to repeatedly ask forgiveness. The Bible is full of calls to repentance, to grow, to mature, to put on Christ, to change our behavior! This is what God wants, not because he is angry with us, but because he wants us to forsake our sin and draw closer to him in Christ.

To repent is to rely on God's grace for the power to change our ways, and then to act knowing that grace is sustaining us. And even so, this is not easy. It isn't easy to turn to God when the donut is right in front of you!

This is why fasting is important. Yes, I said that. It is a practice we could regain. To control our spirits, our tongues, our thoughts, our attitudes, we first need to control the simple things, like our stomachs, our appetites. If I can't even stop eating crackers, how can I stop acting like a jerk filled with road rage? The ancients recognized that controlling the body was the first step in controlling the spirit. Jesus expects us to fast but somehow in our day, we Protestants have let that go as unnecessary.

I remember one year in the college Glee Club. We went on tour during Spring Break, and some women went with us; we had a mixed ensemble that sang too. Anyway, these two women had given up chocolate for Lent. And everywhere we went, every church reception, every home they stayed in, there was chocolate cake. They said it was like a conspiracy; everyone was offering them delicious homemade chocolate cake. Lent was very hard for them that year!

I don't mean "giving up chocolate for Lent," though if chocolate is really an addiction for you, maybe you should give it up. I mean abstaining from or using less of things that we rely on, things like our phones and televisions, or eating less overall. Perhaps we can refrain from gossip, or bad-mouthing those we don't like, or criticizing others. Perhaps we can be less self-centered. Anything that helps us achieve things like that, that is our fast.

To consider ourselves dead to sin is the way Paul puts it. We have died, he says, in our baptism. We have died with Christ. And so what has died is dead, it has no power or influence over us. If we have died, we are free from sin. It should no longer rule over us, control us, or tempt us to disobey God. Sin should be withering away; we should be closer to God. We are dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus.

And so I call on you to keep Lent. Keep the season. Pray, and seek the will of God for your life. What do you need to give up? What do you need to take up? What do you need to repent of? How will the Spirit lead you and help you to become closer to God in Christ Jesus this season?

Present yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life, and present your members to God as instruments of righteousness.

God will draw you close! Thanks be to God. Amen.