

Ash Wednesday, 2015. Matthew 6:1-6,16-21 St Augustine's in-the-Woods, Freeland
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Notice how Matthew reports Jesus as saying "in order to be seen" when he talks about the purpose of public displays? It's okay to do things – like having a cross of ashes on your forehead – in public, provided the intent is only that we may be seen. It's not about us!

As I reflect on that it seems to me that this raises questions about the purpose of Lent. When we know that something important is going to happen in our lives - something that we can predict for certain, at a set time - then the natural thing to do (you'd think) is to prepare!

Of course, even when it's the logical thing to do that doesn't mean we all do it! There's that old saw about the sign posted on the door of a 12-step meeting room that says "Procrastinators Anonymous meeting postponed to tomorrow"!

Some of us plan meticulously; others of us work best under pressure and do that planning at the last minute; still others do no planning, and "fly by the seat of their pants."

Usually you can tell which method has (or in the last case, hasn't!) been used.

Curiously, even though in the abstract it would seem obvious that careful planning is better than haphazard planning, and haphazard planning better than no planning, we human beings still display a striking lack of consistency when it comes to planning ahead, sometimes quite literally. I remember driving into the town of New Oxford PA, not far from Gettysburg. A roadside sign warned that there was a traffic circle ahead. Whoever had prepared the sign had run out of room, and so the word "AHEAD" - naturally written in capital letters – had a tiny lower-case letter "d" at the end! You'd think that something like that was a no-brainer!

And I suppose that leads to another part of the bigger picture - planning is all very well, but it is nothing more than a few ideas unless we take active steps in preparation.

That's one reason why good planning doesn't guarantee positive results! Sports teams do both - planning AND preparation – all the time. Great sports teams – and great coaches – review their schedules, send staff to watch their future opponents, plan on how they will approach the game, then prepare. It all requires forethought, reflection.

That brings us to this day and this season of Lent. Today we begin the season that is a preparation for the celebration of Jesus' resurrection – the Christian "Pascha", Easter.

I've often wondered how we'd approach Lent if Easter wasn't guaranteed to happen?! What if Easter's occurring were predicated on and dependent on the quality of our preparation?

Perhaps it does. Easter *will* happen whether we prepare or not. But what about Easter's meaning, Easter's significance for each of us?

I believe the significance of Easter for each of us - the extent to which we find ourselves drawn into the moment and experience of the Day of Resurrection - I believe that the power, the significance, the meaning its happening is in some way dependent on our commitment to plan and prepare for its coming.

What, then, does Lent mean for us? I don't think there's a common answer - though I do think there are some common things to say about what Lent is not - at least for me, anyway.

- If Lent means giving up things,
- If it means hearing constant reminders of how worthless and temporary I am,
- If Lent is about the glorification of suffering,

Then Lent holds no meaning for me. And – alas - the way that we begin it today – with a narrow or exclusive focus on human finitude, sinfulness and blood– doesn't bode well.

- But if, on the other hand, Lent means embracing the importance of self-reflection when it comes to my identity as a disciple,
- If it means reflecting on who I think – and hope – Jesus is for me;
- If it means wondering what (if anything) the cross really means (there are at least 7 official answers to that question! Look up “Atonement” and you'll find some of them!). Several - called, variously the Satisfaction, Ransom, and Penal substitution Theories are based on distinct cultural settings that are not compelling in the 21st Century.
- If Lent is about reflecting on what I understand the meaning of the resurrection to be, and how it changes me and my life;
- If Lent is about preparing creatively for the transformation that will inevitably follow if I embrace even a little of the rich meaning of the cross, the resurrection, the ascension, and the gift of the Spirit;

If Lent is all - or even some - of those things, then then Lent has meaning to me.

And if Lent is all - or even some - of those things for you, then Lent can be a particularly powerful experience each year.

One thing is for sure: the goal of Lent is not to get through it! If we see Lent simply as a temporary experience to be endured and transitioned as a painful but necessary pre-requisite for Easter then we're missing its real point and value. I'd be willing to bet that if you can embrace a view that says you don't have to berate yourself with your inadequacies; that you don't have to think of yourself as a worthless soul whose only redemptive value is in what God sees in you; that if you don't have to give up all kinds of things, things that actually give you joy - if all of those things are untrue then maybe Lent can become a season of greater interest for you!

For me, I need Lent to be a time of clearing away the old furniture that's accumulated in the attic - much loved and treasured, though it may be - and focusing on what it means to be a Christian in the 21st Century - how can I be a follower of Jesus? What does it mean to live with integrity, honesty, devotion, and commitment?

What do you need for Lent to be so that you can arrive at Easter in a receptive and open frame of mind?