

Ash Wednesday, February 10, 2016 Joel 2:1-2,12-17, 2 Corinthians 5:20b-6:10
Matthew 6:1-6,16-21 St. Augustine's in-the-Woods, Freeland WA Nigel Taber-Hamilton

What is Lent? Is it a chance to lose weight by abstaining from dessert, or chocolate? Is it to give up some habit you know is not really healthy, for you or for others?

Or is it taking on something? Some new, productive project that will help others; some new prayer discipline? Something that brings joy, or something that requires sacrifice?

Or is Lent not about doing or not doing but rather about being or not being?

Or all of those things?

Let's face it, in our contemporary world, Lent is a little bit of a smorgasbord – it becomes what you or I think it should be. “You pay your money and you make your choice:” the naturally penitent will choose a penitential discipline; those who are routinely optimistic and upbeat will go for the joyful embrace; those who are doers will find something to do.

And that's fine.

I also think, though, that there's something to be said for going against type: for the penitent to choose joy; the joyful to reflect on loss; the optimistic to embrace penitence.

The truth is, Lent doesn't have to have sacrifice as its primary mood. In fact, I wonder if Lent doesn't overstate suffering – or, at least, does so, if we let it. And we are very good at letting Lent get away with an overboard of suffering that quickly devolves into the questioning of our self-worth. Down that path lies a digression from a “good and holy Lent” where our practices can easily digress toward behaviors that seek to justify the gift of resurrection or assuage our guilt about Jesus' crucifixion instead of living out a life shaped by death and new creation.

So Lent's starting place matters. And thinking of that starting place I think one orientation that won't always help, and one that will: You can suffer through Lent. Or, you can choose to move through Lent from a place of wonder and gratitude.

The wondering could be around where God might show up, what God might reveal in this dormant time. We have that space, because we choose to set aside this time of Lent so as to anticipate life, a time that looks forward to glimpses of new creation.

And gratitude – even now, as we begin Lent – also seems appropriate, for irrespective of what we journey through these next 40 days there is always the certainty of the resurrection.

But let's not get too far ahead of ourselves! I think we spend way too much of our lives resting in anticipation of a future life with God, rather than living life in the here and now, and in the assurance of God's presence.

So maybe Lent should be a time to practice what living in the hope of the resurrection might look like and feel like **in the present** and not only that which is secured for our future.

That's tricky, of course, because the world we live in is one that seems centered not on the positive but the negative. Heck, listen to the exit polls from yesterday's primary: people are angry! They're negative; and the politicians have responded in kind.

It's certainly true that there's much in our world that challenges, seems to disappoint or threaten. And it should never be easy to discount the suffering caused by betrayal, denial, pain, and death. But Lent reminds us that in the midst of these sober truths of human existence, resurrection is the greater truth.

Where does guilt fit into all of this? Because guilt has always seemed to be a part of Lent.

It seems to me that we're far more comfortable with discomfort that arises from the guilt we are supposed to feel rather than guilt that is justified. Lent is a time to call out the radical difference between guilt and sadness. Lent is a time to name our grief, not for our complicity in the events that led to Jesus' death, but how we continue to let empire and power overpower witness and prophecy. Telling these kinds of truths about Lent will make Lent make a difference.

So, what sort of Lent will you embrace? How will you choose to live and work and minister these next five weeks?

You don't have to tell me! Or anyone else; just do it. Decide how you want your Lent to be and remember that no one else has to know. Think about how you might come out on the other side, not exhausted, wiped out, or questioning how you might ever get through another Lent ever again, but with a sense of knowing what resurrection life looks like.