

Look and Listen and Lent

Just a quick word about our business meeting last Sunday night. In case you weren't here, we had a quick but eventful meeting. All three of the deacon nominees were ratified by your vote. Congratulations to Scott Parmley, Ruth Dunn and Roy Hood, and in case you were wondering, I'm still the pastor. I said the meeting was eventful because for the first time in our history a woman was chosen to serve as a deacon. It is possible that somewhere in the past a woman served as secretary or treasurer, that was much more common in our churches, but I am thankful for Ruth Dunn and her willingness to serve. I can think of no one better to serve as the first female deacon at Carbondale. I just wanted to recognize her and that moment in the life of our church. We have some powerful role models in this church for the next generation, both male and female, pastors, teachers, leaders and now deacons.

We finished our Look and Listen series last Sunday, but I decided to add one more. I called this Look and Listen and Lent. You may know that this Wednesday is Ash Wednesday and the beginning of the church season of Lent. Lent is the 40 day period that comes before Easter. Traditionally the period of Lent was a time of introspection, reflection and repentance. We've been talking about looking to and listening to Jesus. That's what Lent was all about. 40 days of focusing on him, reflecting on and focusing on his death, burial and resurrection, but also looking inward, examining our own heart and our devotion to the Lord. It was a penitential time of fasting and prayer. I've heard people say, "We don't do Lent because it's Catholic." While the Catholic church has carried on this tradition, the tradition of fasting before Easter was going on before there was ever a Catholic church. It was just "the church." There are churches of all stripes, Protestant and Catholic that observe Lent. Besides, who can complain about the practice of taking forty days to fast and pray and focus on the Lord and his sacrifice for us? That's spiritual discipline and good for the soul and the body.

Joan Chittester, in her book *The Liturgical Year*, explains why fasting was a part of Lent. **"There is nothing like a touch of voluntary hunger – the unsatisfied compulsion to seek comfort food, to bask in self-indulgence, to demand constant physical fulfillment – to give an edge to the capacity for spiritual concentration. Acuity of soul and consciousness of a life beyond the material come more easily when the material is not allowed to smother us."** ...**Joan Chittister** We said over these past weeks that we had to find a way to silence the distractions and focus on Jesus. That's what this season of Lent, this 40 day period of time, is all

about. When people talk about giving up something for Lent, it is, as the quote says, giving an edge to our capacity for spiritual concentration. We are choosing to feed our soul and spirit rather than our body. I like that reference to not allowing the material to smother us.

Ash Wednesday marks the beginning of Lent. In many churches a service will be held that includes the imposition of ashes. Ashes in the Bible were a symbol of repentance, grief and remorse. The Old Testament refers to fasting, wearing sackcloth and ashes, or repenting in the dust with ashes on your head. It was a sign of humbling yourself before God and repenting of your sins. It was a mark of extreme humility.

Typically the minister or priest will make the sign of the cross on the person's forehead with ashes. As the minister marks the worshipper's forehead he or she will say, "**Remember you are dust and to dust you shall return.**" Often he will add, "**Turn away from sin and be faithful to the gospel.**" Some leave the mark on their forehead throughout the day as a sign of their sorrow over their sins. Some wash it off before leaving the church as a sign they have been cleansed from their sins.

As part of our effort to look and listen to the Lord, and as part of joining with Christians from various traditions in focusing our heart and mind on Christ's death and resurrection, I want to suggest we do a couple of things over the next 40 days. Whether you have ashes on your forehead on Wednesday or whether you call this season Lent, I suggest we use this time, these 40 days, to **Confess our sinfulness, willfulness and pride and acknowledge our continual need of God's forgiveness, mercy and grace.** The bible tells us all of us have sinned and missed the mark. We have sinned and we are sinners and it is only through the grace of God and the sacrifice of Jesus that we are now saved. Let's be aware of that fleshly nature that is still warring against our spiritual nature. Flee temptation, resist the devil because none of us are above falling. We need his forgiveness, mercy and grace.

My nephew, who is a deacon in the Russian Orthodox church, wrote an article some years ago regarding Orthodox Lent. (Their fast consists of abstinence from meat, eggs, dairy products, fish, wine and oil.) In the article he pointed out that fasting and the Lenten season "reminds us that we have fallen short, that we are not the people we should be, that we have become entirely focused on aggrandizing and sating ourselves, and as a result these ancient services engender a sense of sorrow. But the sense of freedom we experience as we relinquish

this terrible self-centeredness produces joy in our hearts. If we do not to some extent attain to this joy through mourning, we have entirely missed the point of Lent.”

Take time to repent for sins we have committed, mourn for the wrong we have done and the good we haven't done. It's time for godly sorrow that leads to repentance that in turn leads to forgiveness and peace. Repent and acknowledge that only by his mercy and grace are we saved, only by his mercy and grace can we have the hope of eternal life, only by his mercy and grace can we live to please him and serve him. Acknowledge our utter and complete dependence upon the Lord and his grace.

Stuart Malloy wrote, “We who will bear the ashes upon our foreheads stand with those whose sins may be more public, but not, according to the Scriptures, more grievous to the heart of God. And so we make our confessions...If you only knew the secrets of my heart, if you only knew the sins that I am capable of contemplating, if you only knew some of the schemes I have considered-and of course God does know-then you would know that I, too, am a sinner. Ashes are signs that we are all in this sin business together, and that the difference between the good in us and the bad in us is sometimes frightfully thin. We so often fall short of the Faith we claim. We have treated people as things and we have treated things as if they were valuable people. And so we look into our heart and make the ancient prayer of one notorious sinner our own. “Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me.” Psalm 51:10. Lent is a season that reminds us to repent and get our lives centered, our priorities straight and our hearts clean.” Look and listen to Jesus as we confess our sins and acknowledge our dependence on him.

Secondly, as you take time to look and listen during Lent, **Acknowledge where you came from – that you are dust and to dust you shall return.** In one of his books Max Lucado suggested we should “make major decisions in a cemetery.” It helps maintain perspective. It helps us recall how we got here, what we are made of and how quickly we will be gone. The bible records, “...the Lord God formed the man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life and the man became a living being.” Genesis 2:7 There is something off-putting but instructive, something moving and compelling about someone pointing out our condition: Remember you are dust and to dust you shall return.

We are made out of dust and there is nothing more common than dust. Nothing flattering about it. You never say, “I sure like the way you've arranged all the dust in your living room.”

We start to think we are better than others, we look down on others, they are less intelligent, less gifted, less attractive and then someone reminds you we are all just dust.

Paul reminds us where we came from when he writes, **“But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all surpassing power is from God and not from us.” 2 Corinthians 4:7.** We are all just dust, at our best jars of clay. Whatever we accomplish it’s because of the life giving breath of God and his grace that makes all the difference.

Ash Wednesday and during Lent, remember where you came from. Remember we are dust and dust can blow away pretty quickly. We start thinking we’re going to be around forever, we’ve got time later to live for God, plenty of time to make things right with family or friends. We’re too busy to bother with God or spiritual things. We need to remember we are dust. We weren’t made for this life only, we’re made for eternity. Revelation 18 talks about the destruction of powerful cities and people and empires and repeatedly it says, “in one hour she has been brought to ruin, in one hour great wealth is brought to ruin.” In one hour, everything can change. We are dust, life can be brief, look to Jesus, listen to Jesus, live for Jesus. Don’t let yourself get too attached to this world or the things of this world. It’s all headed back to dust. We are just passing through this life and we aren’t taking anything with us. Let me read something I wrote a few years ago. I think it was in 2011, just a couple of weeks before my Dad passed away. He was living with us and we were dealing with dementia and his failing health. (Read Ash Wednesday) We are dust, but someday this dust shall sing God’s praises!

The third thing as we enter this season of Lent and we consider the death and resurrection of Jesus: **Consider that through your faith in Christ, through your baptism, through your daily walk with him, you participate in his death and resurrection.** What does that mean? The apostle Paul says in Romans 6 we are buried with Christ in baptism and raised to live a new life in him. These 40 days should be about increased devotion, about a greater awareness of our responsibility to take up our cross and follow him, a greater willingness to surrender ourselves to God and his purpose, daily dying to our self and finding our life centered in Christ. 40 days to repent, to mourn over our sins and 40 days to rejoice in the forgiveness and grace provided to us through Christ’s death on the cross and his resurrection from the dead. Let these forty days be a time of greater awareness of what Jesus has done for you, the price he paid, greater awareness of the resurrection life of Christ that is at work in your life. Find time to quiet your heart and mind during these 40 days and think of what it means, that you are crucified with Christ and dead to

sin and the old way of life and resurrected to a new life in Christ. We live a new way, a new life in him!

I mentioned at the beginning of the message that one of the ways we focus our looking and listening during Lent is by fasting or giving up something during Lent. You may want to try a fast this year. Some fast certain foods, some fast certain entertainment or hobbies. Some sign off Facebook or social media for 40 days. Whatever you do, let these 40 days before Easter be a time of dying to yourself and becoming more alive in Christ. It's a shift in focus and priorities. It is a time for giving up some things in order to focus more clearly and intently on the truly important things – spiritual things – focusing on Christ and his sacrifice. In the article my nephew wrote, he mentioned that “fasting is primarily about obedience, and thus humility. But it also creates a sense of need and sobriety. It teaches us to seek our consolation in things of the spirit rather than of the flesh.” We fast in order to find our consolation, our satisfaction, in things of the Spirit rather than the flesh. If you fast television in the evenings then fill that time with reading the bible or other books that will feed your soul and spirit, or spend the time in prayer, or even spend the time with family and friends. Feed the spirit and not the flesh.

You might want to just read one of the gospels over the next 40 days. Read the gospel of Mark or John. In past years I've recommended a couple of books for Lent. One written by Walter Wangerin that I've read at Lent, *Reliving the Passion* or Richard John Neuhaus' classic book, *Death On A Friday Afternoon*. Perhaps you could fast one or two lunches a week and spend that time in prayer or reading the Scripture. Lent is also about giving. You might take that time usually spent eating lunch to do a good deed for someone.

Repenting, confessing, fasting, praying, giving, preparing, opening your heart and mind and spirit to the Lord for renewal, refreshing and restoration. Looking and listening to Jesus more intently, more focused on him. That's part of what the Lenten season can provide as we begin the journey toward the cross and our celebration of the resurrection of the Lord. Give thought to how you'll spend the next 40 days, starting Wednesday. Whatever you decide, let's increase the time and attention we spend on spiritual things over these next 40 days. It will make the meaning and joy of Easter more real and more powerful than ever.

I want us to take a moment to turn our hearts in repentance to the Lord. Listen to the words of repentance from King David and let your heart echo the words, the heart of David as he throws himself upon the mercy of the Lord. Psalm 51:1-17