

Past Sermons

Ash Wednesday
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St. Paul's Episcopal Church
Salt Lake City
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You might be surprised that the public library in downtown Salt Lake has a pretty decent assortment of devotional resources. From a book on their shelf I found a prayer that has become a favorite of mine.

Lord, light a candle within my heart
that I may see what lies therein and sweep the rubbish from your dwelling place.

In this prayer is definition of sin, an acknowledgment of God's place in our lives, and a simple, but elegant invitation to a Holy Lent.

Last Sunday's gospel based on the transfiguration invited us to gaze for a moment at God, as God really is. Three days later, on this first day of Lent, we are called to get a glimpse of our selves as we really are. We have become a list-making people so on Ash Wednesday, we begin to make our annual list of sins. Our recitation of offenses can be compelling, sometimes humorous and usually tedious. I hate to admit it, but my list is not even very creative. The pitiful part of listing these offenses is that adding your list to mine and our lists to those of each person we know, our lists don't begin to be exhaustive. The possible permutations of sin are infinite. We have come up with so many ways to block God's love in our life — so many ways to keep God's love from the lives of those around us.

During Lent as we examine ourselves, we travel in very familiar territory. The purpose of this self-examination is not to be impressed with or surprised by our sins, or to get stuck in delicious self-loathing. We already know ourselves fairly well. The purpose of this self-examination is to know ourselves as God knows us. You see, the person you come to understand more clearly during Lent is the person God knows even more intimately and loves even more deeply than you can imagine. The person you uncover upon closer self-examination is exactly the person for whom Jesus died.

Once we see ourselves as God sees us, as those who have been made righteous through Christ, our focus must no longer be our sin, or our selves but our new life in Christ. The sins which we have named and for which we have been forgiven, are no longer obstacles to salvation but if they remain the focus of this Lenten season, they will become obstacles to our new and holy life in Christ. Once we have identified the ways in which we place barriers to God's love we can begin to remove them from that central place in our lives where God wishes to dwell.

Therein lies the challenge of a holy Lent. Removing the barriers to God's love, sweeping the rubbish from our lives, making space for God requires intentionality and hard work. The traditional Lenten disciplines of self-denial, alms-giving, study and prayer are not tests to measure one's commitment, but are helpful ways to shift attention away from our selves and our sin toward that holy life to which God continually calls us.

My prayer for each of you this Lent is that you may come to know yourself as God knows you as one who is beloved and forgiven. My hope is that you intentionally make room in your life and in your heart for the one who knows and loves you best.

Let us pray.

Lord, light a candle within my heart
that I may see what lies therein
and sweep the rubbish from your dwelling place. Amen.