

Sermon – Ash Wednesday

February 10, 2016

Cathedral of the Incarnation

By your attendance here this day you are participating not only in an ancient rite of the church stretching back to the second century, but you are also participating in something special in our relationship with God that stretches back almost as far as our scripture dates. From some of the earliest scripture we hear of people repenting for their waywardness and applying ashes to themselves as an outward sign of their penitence.

“Blow the trumpet in Zion; sound the alarm on my holy mountain! Let all the inhabitants of the land tremble, for the day of the Lord is coming, it is near.” Joel sounds the alarm for the people of Zion some 2,500 years ago. Yet even in the face of the Lord’s return Joel reminds the ancient Israelites that the Lord stands waiting for their return, for their return with hearts for reconciliation with God. God is gracious, merciful, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love, and relents from punishing.

The season of Lent that commences today is a season of communal and personal penitence that prepares our hearts and souls for our most holy season, that being the passion of our Lord, the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. For many it is a season of trite sacrifice, of giving up chocolate or alcohol or some other pleasure that we might feel we overindulge in. When we do this I feel we miss the true essence of this season and what penitence means in our relationship with God.

In order then for us to orientate ourselves for this season we need to have a feel and an understanding of our relationship with God. Who are we in relationship to God, and who is God in relationship to us.

Anslem of Canterbury wrote in 1078 that God was “that than which nothing greater can be conceived.” He believed that this being existed in our minds, even in the minds of those that did not believe. If we could conceive of this greatest being in our minds then God existed in reality. This is horribly simple for the complex argument for God’s existence but where it resonates with me is that we constantly expand our minds to understand all that exists in reality and we use our created imagination to move the world forward, thus we can constantly expand our minds in our quest to understand the breath and depth of the God that is central to our lives.

Through Jesus coming into the world we gained a larger insight into God’s existence and into God’s love for us. Through scripture, from the accounts of the prophets and the apostles and disciples of Jesus, we have testimony from witnesses and communities about God. And now through the Holy Spirit we have an advocate with God, a line of communication if we are only able to connect.

God wouldn’t be God without us I believe. This is why I like the first creation account because it was through the creation of humans that brought into being the essential relationship that makes

the world work. God hates nothing that God has made. Of all creation, we are the only creatures that can have a volitional relationship with God, in the sense of relating to one another by choice. Without our relationship to God, humankind would have wiped itself out. It is through our acknowledgment of God, and our relationship and submission to God, that we are able to love, to have compassion and to live out justice.

God is love, and Jesus gives us the new commandment, which is to love God first, then to model this love for our neighbor. God's love for us represents for me God's permanent state of pathos, God forever responding to our fallen nature by extending the metaphorical hand to help us up, to dust us off and to hug us. Love of God equals compassion for us, and compassion equals justice for all. This is how God acts in this world, and how we come back into relationship with God. Our waywardness angers God, as our rejection of family or friends angers them most likely, but God annuls God's anger through our repentance.

By understanding this we can understand the basis of our relationship with God. This is creation at work, the constant falling out of relation, and the coming back into relation and into a new way of being. God sought a relationship with Abraham and Sarah and blessed it with a covenant. The covenant was renewed with Moses and last Sunday we heard what that did for Moses when he spent 40 days and nights in the presence of God on the mountain. Moses came down the mountain radiating the glory of God from his face. Jesus finally came to us to be God's instrument of love, healing and reconciliation, and who was transfigured by God's glory on the mountain, witnessed this time by Peter, James and John. These witnesses heard God saying that Jesus was the Chosen One and to listen to him.

God sent Jesus as an instrument of love, compassion, justice and even anger at our stubbornness. Our sin becomes a disturbance in our relationship with God. Our fallenness, our brokenness, our constant repeating of all that stands in opposition to the essence of God, puts us away from the heart of this one crucial relationship in our lives. No other relationship exists where one half offers the full depth of love, compassion and justice. No other relationship, period!

This relationship with God is the core of our creation, whether we choose to acknowledge it or not. Our acknowledgement is though within our own power. God is a constant in this relationship but we are not. So we need a reminder to realign ourselves with God's creative intention.

This is the season. This is the season that is our annual reminder. This is the season that has been repeated for centuries in the church. By your participation here today you join with millions around the world in seeking to realign your lives with God. God has freely offered us the grace of reconciliation through Jesus Christ and it is now up to us to respond with penitence and obedience, and with hearts desiring a deeper connection.

Paul reminds us not to accept this grace in vain but to do something with it, to respond appropriately. To do it now! "See now is the acceptable time; see, now is he day of salvation," he says. There are no barriers to God's grace but our own. By being here today and reverently entering into this season of Lent we are commended as servants of God, Paul says, through our endurance, hardships, sleepless nights, by patience, genuine love, truthful speech and the power of God.

The world sees and treats us one way, heaps scorn and doubt upon us, sometimes ridicules us but we know more deeply than those who don't know God, just how their perceptions are incorrect. Paul says it beautifully in the Epistle to the Corinthians. "We are treated as imposters, and yet are true; as unknown, and yet are well known; as dying, and see – we are alive; as punished, and yet not killed; as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing everything."

So as we start into our Lenten journey today let the words of Jesus be carried in your hearts as a guide for each day. The words of Jesus from the Gospel according to Matthew (6:1-6,16-21) remind us that we are to remain humble and reverent in our giving of ourselves, and our gifts. We are to pray in quiet where we can find God in the stillness and silence of our prayer. We are to fast in a way that does not draw attention to what we are doing. We are not to brag and maybe post on Twitter or Facebook that our fast is making us hungry. No we are to do this holy act in secret. We are also to focus our lives on the values of the kingdom – love, justice and compassion, and on our ongoing relationship with God. These are the treasures that will be most valuable to us as we live out the rest of our lives.

We are blessed that the ancient church established this holy time of penitence and reconciliation as a time of preparation for the passion of our Lord, and for his ultimate resurrection. We need this reminder every year of just what blessings we have as followers of Jesus Christ, the son of the living God. What blessing we have to believe in a God that only wants us to be in relation of love and to model this relationship with others. What a blessing to constantly reflect and pray about this relationship.

May this day be holy for you as you start this season here in the Cathedral. May you find space in your life for stillness before God, to allow God to be in communion with you. Take up this holy time each day as a spiritual discipline and reflect on how God is calling you into a deeper and deeper relationship.

May God bless you and keep you close.

Amen