

Sermon Text for March 1, 2020

By Rev. Robert K. Bronkema

Joel 2:12-17, Matthew 6:1-6

“The journey begins”

I want to welcome you as we begin together the first week of a season in the life of the church that we call Lent. It is interesting that since we find ourselves in a place here in Lancaster County where the liturgical calendar is not something on the forefront of everyone’s mind that what exactly Lent is just might be a puzzling to some folks. We had our Ash Wednesday service on this past Wednesday and after the service a couple came in, they had misread the times of the service, and they said this was their first time to an Ash Wednesday service and they really didn’t understand what Lent was all about, isn’t it a Catholic thing after all?

Let me give you a few minutes tutorial on Lent just so that if anyone here finds themselves in the same boat as that couple that came late you can at least leave here today knowing what Lent is and why we celebrate it and how we celebrate it. The Lent that we observe is very similar as to the one which is observed by Roman Catholics, Eastern Orthodox, and other mainline Protestant denominations. There are 40 days in Lent if you don’t count the Sundays and it begins on Ash Wednesday and ends on the Saturday before Easter.

The idea of Lent comes from this concept of 40 where we find Jesus before he begins his ministry, so before he calls his disciples, before he teaches, before he performs any miracles, he goes into the wilderness and is tempted by the devil for 40 days. He overcomes those temptations and so then begins his ministry after having discerned, understood what the desire of his Father was for his life. Jesus’ time in the wilderness prepared him at the beginning of his ministry for his life of ministry. Jesus didn’t go through Lent because there was no formal Lent to go through.

40 is also how long the Israelites wandered in the wilderness. 40 is also how many days and nights it rained on Noah and his family while they were in the ark. So this time period is a time of preparation. I call it today, a journey, a journey that we begin together. So the what is this 40 days, some have the tradition of giving something up for Lent as a way to practice spiritual disciplines so that if you don’t eat meat you will miss meat and it will cause you to remember why you are giving it up, in order to strengthen your relationship with Jesus. As Protestants that isn’t our tradition. We tend to take on for Lent certain spiritual disciplines that maybe we should already be involved in and strengthen them like daily prayer, or daily Bible

reading, or fasting for a specific cause, or reaching out in a scheduled basis to help those in need.

So these are the What, the Why, and the How in regards to Lent. In the Scripture today what we will find which will set the stage and prepare us for this season of Lent of which this is the first Sunday, we find in the very first verse of our Scripture an admonition to make sure that whatever you do for Lent, whatever you do in your own personal piety, to strengthen your relationship with Jesus you do it with the focus on pleasing God and not just trying to please people. That was our emphasis on Ash Wednesday, to ensure that all that we do and all that we say is pleasing to God. Let's go ahead and read.

READ SCRIPTURE

The theological reasoning behind Lent is to raise up the recognition that every single one of us in this room and beyond these walls is a sinner. Each one of us has fallen short of the glory of God and so as a result we need a Savior, we need a redeemer who would choose to die for us so that in his death he conquers our sin and gives us new life. Our responsibility is to recognize that we are sinner and to turn our lives over to Christ because we simply are not able to save ourselves. We simply cannot live our lives in such a way, no matter how hard we try or no matter how disciplined we are, we cannot save ourselves. The separation between us and God is so great. But only through the work of Jesus on the cross and in his resurrection do we have salvation.

So that is where the journey leads us. But we can't really begin this Lenten journey together unless we start with the premise that something is not right with us. I have to say that there are a series of commercials that are our now that have caught my attention and that are perfectly associated with Lent. They portray certain situations in life that we know as we are watching them that they just aren't right, there is something wrong with what is portrayed. For example a carpet shower and it shows a man in the shower which is lined completely in carpet and the person in the commercial as they catch that vision makes the statement: That's not right. Or the finger dip where you have a bowl of dip at the party and everyone is supposed to use their fingers to try it out and you have a table surrounded with people just diving in with their fingers and as you watch that you can't help but think what? That's not right.

Or, and this might be my favorite, an ad for chunky milk and there is an all-american family chewing away at their milk as it pours out in chunks and trying not to gag you have to say to yourself what: That's not right. Lent is a time in our own lives that as we introspectively look at ourselves we have to be able to be honest with ourselves and recognize what? That's not

right, there is something that is wrong with me, there is something fundamental amiss and that is that I do not look to please God nearly as much as I try to please those around me or myself. The journey of lent has to begin with a recognition of our own sinfulness and then, and only then, can we see that Scripture speaks of only one Way on this journey, this Way is also the Truth and the Life and that is Jesus Christ.

In our first Scripture today we see the prophet Joel similarly reach out to his people and beseech them to return to the Lord. Look at those verses, there are two times where he encourages them on a journey of returning back to those things which created a relationship with God that was solid and dedicated. Some of you might be here today and you find yourself in a season in your life where you have slipped from turning to the God. Over these past few years life has been busy, you have been in constant transition, your schedule has been packed and your relationship with God has suffered as a result. Joel encourages us to return to the Lord. Later on he says gather the children, even infants at the breast, return to the Lord. This is not only an individual appeal but an appeal to the community as a whole. We will see more about that later.

We begin our journey today with an appeal to return to the Lord. Joel lifts up some spiritual disciplines as a way in which to return. He speaks of being obedient to God as a way in which to begin this journey which will bring you back to a relationship with God that maybe you never had, or once had and have now overlooked. John Calvin once said: All right knowledge of God is born of obedience. He paired that with we cannot truly love God if we do not love, or learn to love ourselves as we are loved by God. These are such central components to our journey today.

Our Matthew Scripture focuses upon our Lenten journey as not only being one of obedience, but one where it is a private one, one that we ought not share for the sake of others around us being impressed with what we are doing for Lent. Turn to Matthew and you will see at the very first verse we read beware of practicing your piety, or your spirituality, before others in order to be seen by them. Lent is not a time to show off how spiritual you are to others around you.

This goes back to our theme on Ash Wednesday on who are we trying to please in this journey, God or other people. A real practical test, and maybe a challenge, for many of us during this Lenten season could be this. A few years back we did a no device Lent and it was more or less effective. I want to challenge you this year that if you are posting during this Lenten season then only post positive. Only post something that would please God. So much of the poison that is in our culture is that we look for opportunities to just slam someone because of who they

support or what they believe. What if you only posted positive for Lent, what would that look like? It isn't as easy as you would think.

Let's focus back on Matthew 6 and see why Jesus tells us how important it is for us to focus on our relationship with God as the motivational factor for why we do what we do. Jesus says do not let your personal piety be seen by others, or be the motivational factor for why you are spiritual. Can I tell you a secret? There are many Sundays that when Chris is playing I want to raise my hands and praise God, or when we are singing with the praise team I want to raise my hands and praise God. For a Presbyterian that is saying a lot. But I worry that if I do that then will you as a congregation feel pressured to do the same not because you want to praise God but because you want to please me, or let people around you know that you are spiritual.

Jesus says when you give, don't let others know, when you pray, don't speak just so that those around you think that you are a good prayer. The journey that you take during Lent has to be a personal one. It has to be one where you recognize that something is not right, and that the only one who can fix it is Jesus. But at the base of our relationship with Jesus which is personal as Presbyterians we believe that God is able to work in this church body in ways that He doesn't work in individuals. It is no coincidence that right after he says don't practice your spirituality so other people can so it, he teaches his disciples the Lord's prayer which has become the single most well known communal prayer in history.

This body was called in the first century the Way, just like Jesus who was the Way, the Truth and the life. The journey that we embark on has to be a personal one, one where we admit that we are sinner and open our lives for Jesus to come in. But the church has to be a part of that journey as well. Tertullian an early Christian Father, once said when speaking about the church: "See how Christians love one another, see how they are ready to die for each other." Is our journey this Lenten season one where we would be willing to die for each other? If it is, then we will be making a statement to the rest of the nation, in a nation that has decided to be divided where they obviously do not love each other and would be more than willing to kill each other than die for each other.

What if this Lent Christians decided that we would be willing to die for each other? What if we were willing to die for our Christian brothers and sisters coming from Central America. What would that look like? What if we would be willing to die for our Christian brothers and sisters who were on the other side of the political aisle than from where we were, what would that look like? It would change this community, it would change this church.

Join me and us on this journey this Lenten season, one that focuses on pleasing God and not ourselves or others who are like us. Join us this Lenten season as we recognize that there is which lives and abounds and the only way that is can be defeated is through Jesus Christ. Amen.