

## February 18 First Sunday of Lent

Today is the First Sunday of Lent. Lent is the season of preparation leading up to Easter. It officially began on Wednesday which is referred to as Ash Wednesday and it continues for 40 days plus Sundays which don't count as days of discipline because every Sunday is a little Easter and as the church year came to be what it is, there was an understanding that Sunday would always be a day of celebration of the resurrection.

Now, all of that might sound a little stuffy and old-fashioned, but I would offer up a reflection that we live our lives in all kinds of seasons. Basketball season passes the baton to Track season or Baseball/Softball season which passes on to Football and Volleyball season (which isn't exactly true at all levels of gameplay but you get the idea). Winter gives way to Spring which surrenders to Summer which eventually embraces Fall and so on.

The seasons of the church year help us to remember the movements of God and hopefully we find each to be valuable for their uniqueness. That said, the season of Lent is a time for a bit of assessment and refocusing on God.

In our Ash Wednesday service, we encountered the truth of God's promise to bring new life from the ashes of our death to self, from that which we have surrendered to death or that which has fallen dead due to things outside our control. Our God is a God who creates and recreates. From the ashes, from our chosen humility, God makes things new.

Making Me New will be the overarching theme for this season of Lent. I know that our God is at work to make us new in lots of ways and in many aspects of our lives. And I just had a sense from the Spirit that many of us needed to know that the pile of ash at the feet of broken or surrendered parts of our lives isn't the end, but merely the fertile soil of new beginnings.

As we walk with Jesus toward the cross, toward the making of all things new, let's start with a word from Mark's gospel.

Mark 1: 9-15

*<sup>9</sup> About that time, Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee, and John baptized him in the Jordan River. <sup>10</sup> While he was coming up out of the water, Jesus saw heaven splitting open and the Spirit, like a dove, coming down on him. <sup>11</sup> And there was a voice from heaven: "You are my Son, whom I dearly love; in you I find happiness."*

<sup>12</sup> *At once the Spirit forced Jesus out into the wilderness. <sup>13</sup> He was in the wilderness for forty days, tempted by Satan. He was among the wild animals, and the angels took care of him.*

<sup>14</sup> *After John was arrested, Jesus came into Galilee announcing God's good news, <sup>15</sup> saying, "Now is the time! Here comes God's kingdom! Change your hearts and lives, and trust this good news!"*

So, most sermons on the First Sunday of Lent are all about how we need to be disciplined in our living and give up something in order to draw nearer to the Lord. And I believe that fasting and prayer is a powerful spiritual discipline, but it is rarely helpful if we just "give up something for Lent" unless we have a plan for how removing or restricting something will make space for us to actually spend more time with God.

And as I prayed about this particular season of Lent and sought God's fresh word about Jesus heading into the wilderness, it was an unexpected fresh word that God spoke. It was a word about abundance and joy and rest. Sometimes we are all too good at restricting ourselves. There is something in most of us that loves a good rule to follow, a promise we make to God, there is something so clear about saying that we will not eat chocolate or potato chips or we will not look at Facebook or whatever our chosen fast might be. It's clear if we adhere to it and it's clear if we fail miserably.

The thing about "giving up something for Lent" is that it isn't always the spiritual discipline that we need. And I heard from God that it isn't the sacrifice of our sweets or starches that God most desires. What I heard shouted from the mouth of God as I read Mark's gospel is what God spoke over Jesus BEFORE he was ushered out into the time and place of temptation and testing in the wilderness.

Before being thrust into the wilderness for forty days and nights, tempted by Satan, and without other people or supplies, Jesus was reassured of his value to God and his relationship to God. God was not silent as Jesus went into the wilderness and God was not sending him into this time of trial and temptation alone.

I think we often enter into Lent with some kind of notion of what we feel we can reasonably "do" if we choose to participate in fasting at all. And then we use our own willpower to do the thing and we look forward to Easter when the thing is no longer restricted and while we might have looked toward heaven and told God how much we love him and are committed to doing the thing for him, we have perhaps missed out on the chance to grow closer to God which is actually the whole point.

In the wilderness Jesus relied on God in moments of serious temptation, deep hunger, thirst and danger. The wilderness was not a lush forest. It was and is a desert. It is not a place of living off the land, but of living by the sustaining hand of God. Jesus needed this if he was going to be able to trust God through the agony that was ahead of him.

But before being tempted, tested and tried, Jesus was encouraged and uplifted by his Father.

*<sup>11</sup> And there was a voice from heaven: "You are my Son, whom I dearly love; in you I find happiness."*

God finds happiness in Jesus. Before Jesus goes into a hard place, God speaks out loud to affirm his Son. And it just struck my heart that if God finds happiness in Jesus, then we really can, too.

Lent, fasting, prayer, and other things of discipleship and obedience to God are so often thought of as drudgery, boring, unpleasant tasks to be done, but we don't have to face it that way. I read a great book about completing tasks...seeing them through to the end...and one of the greatest revelations that author shared is that for some reason we are wired to think that if something is unpleasant then it must "count" more toward our goal. Or on the flip side, if something is pleasant then it doesn't count as if reaching goals cannot be enjoyable.

Friends, God finds happiness in Jesus. We know that the joy of the Lord is our strength from Nehemiah's word to us. We know that we won't be happy all the time, but happiness can be part of the journey. Fun or at least pleasant activities can draw us closer to God. For me, praying and reading the Bible is pleasant and I think it can be for you as well.

So, I want to suggest today that during this season of Lent we all just take a deep breath and hear the invitation into finding our happiness in Christ. Hear the invitation to be pleased as punch to be found in Christ Jesus our Lord. Hear right now the invitation to let God be Making You New.

BEAUTIFUL THINGS – Kyle and me

God loves you and there's nothing you can do about it. God wants to spend time with you. God wants you to spend time with Him. You and I are God's Beloved.

This Lent, let's engage in the discipline of drawing closer to God. Read God's word. Read the Bible. Let the word change you, grow you, expand your heart and mind.

Just as a seed must break open and ultimately die to give way to the new life it was always designed to become, we must let ourselves break open, draw nourishment from being planted in the Word of God among the people of God, and strain toward the Light of Christ that shines upon us.

This is not a day of ashes, but if you would like to be anointed with oil as sign of God Making You New please feel free to come forward during our closing hymn.