

Sunday, February 7, 2016
All Saints Episcopal Church
San Leandro, California
The Rev. Justin R. Cannon

A Lenten Invitation

In his first letter to the Corinthians, Saint Paul writes, “If there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ has not been raised; and if Christ has not been raised, then our proclamation has been in vain and your faith has been in vain” (1 Corinthians 15:13-14). The Christian faith is fundamentally about a cosmic victory, unlike anything previous and unparalleled by anything to follow. As expressed in the words of the Eucharistic Prayer that you will hear later, each Sunday I offer before God a prayer about Christ in which these words resonate deeply with that cosmic victory: “In him you have delivered us from evil, and made us worthy to stand before you. In him, you have brought us out of error into truth, out of sin into righteousness, out of death into life.” If Christ had just been crucified and the story ended there, death would have had the final word, but the message of the Gospel is one of life triumphant, truth overcoming the thorns of deceit, love overcoming the shadows of violence and fear, so evident in the crucifixion. So, why am I speaking about Resurrection on this last Sunday after the Epiphany, this final Sunday before the beginning of Lent?

I am speaking of Resurrection, because it is the magnum opus of our faith, the fiber of Christianity, the cornerstone of Christianity. “If Christ has not been raised, then our proclamation has been in vain and your faith has been in vain.” Obviously it is no coincidence that Lent is that period of time—forty days and forty nights—leading up to the great mystery of Easter, the Paschal mystery of Christ’s Resurrection. In many ways, the Resurrection of Christ is foreshadowed in today’s Gospel reading—an account of the Transfiguration when Christ’s inward glory as God the Son was manifest outwardly in magnificent light and glory.

Lent has been interpreted and trivialized in many ways, reduced to a very legitimate but overly simplistic question, “What will you give up for Lent?” which doesn’t quite capture the significance of these forty days. If Lent becomes reduced to one mere item to strike from our shopping list, we have lost the intent and spirit of this holy season.

Lent begins this Wednesday—Ash Wednesday—with the services we will hold here at 7am, noon, and 7pm where the imposition of ashes will be available to all. The ashes in sign of the cross on our forehead marks the beginning of a time of inward, spiritual preparation as we draw near to the celebration of the Resurrection, the triumph of Christ. For two millennia Christians have observed a Fast in Lent. It is easy to find many examples of fasting in both the Old and New Testaments. In Old Testament times, fasting was typically an expression of grief, whereas in the New Testament it took on a very different meaning. Fasting became a way of focusing on God and prayer.

This was the intent of Jesus’ 40-day fast in the wilderness. In preparing for his public ministry, Jesus spent a time of intensified prayer, while fasting. If our fasting does not lead us deeper in prayer, we are doing it wrong. This is also why the season of Lent is also a time of the year when the Sacrament of Confession is made more available, as a sacramental and holy space to look inward to ways God is calling us to grow, to change, to learn from our misdoings and to push

forward in our journey of faith. The Sacrament of Confession is perhaps the most under-utilized rites in The Episcopal Church, but is as present as any other in our *Book of Common Prayer*. The Sacrament of Confession is a private rite that creates a sacred space wherein no burden we carry is too egregious to unload, offered to God for forgiveness, and it is a space to seek guidance for a new way forward. I will be available throughout Lent if you would like to schedule time for the Sacrament of Confession—a time to let go of what has been weighing on your heart—a time of preparing ourselves for the festivity and joy of Eastertide. Lent is the doorway to Easter, and Confession invites us to leave the baggage that weighs us down at the door.

Lent is about as counter-cultural as it gets. In a culture of getting the fastest and most, Lent is a time of slowing down and simplifying to focus on our inward journey. Traditionally, for those observing a fast, Sunday is still held as a feast, since every Sunday is a Feast of the Resurrection, a celebration pointing towards the Light of Easter. In the words of one commentator, “Lent offers a concrete way to turn our attention to the upcoming celebration even as we experience a taste of the sorrow of the cross.”

Most of our lives are consumed by “ordinary” things like eating, washing our bodies and homes, cooking, cleaning, and the simple common tasks of daily life and the challenge awaits us day in and day out to meet God in those common places. There is something to be said for a Lenten practice which strips away the frivolous of our daily life, a humble reminder of meeting God in the simple, the mundane, the day-to-day.

If we give up chocolate, coffee, sugar, dairy, TV, or whatnot, but it does not lead further in seeking God, open more time or lead us deeper in prayer, or guide us into a more intention examination of our conscience and spiritual growth, then it would be no better than if we had doubled up on chocolate, coffee, and such. Lent is a time of spiritual renewal, preparation, and inward exploration. There’s no rule in the Bible that says we must fast. There’s no prescription in Christ’s teachings about such. But it is an ancient and edifying practice, observed by Christians in support of one another as we approach this holiest time of commemoration, the Paschal season. Lent approaches not as a cosmic guilt trip nor an external obligation, but an invitation inward, an invitation into deeper intimacy with God through fasting, prayer, and letting go of the burdens that hold us back.

I invite you into this holy season. You’re invited to join us Wednesday at 7am, noon, or 7pm for the Imposition of Ashes. You may contact me anytime to schedule the Sacrament of Confession. For the season of Lent we will also have a book study, a Wednesday soup and prayer, and other offerings to cater to people with busy lifestyles. I’ve tried to create a menu of Lenten offers so that we can all journey this season in some intention way and I pray that in this season you will find what you need most to support you personally in moving forward in your spiritual journey, in the deepening of your relationship with God. As we enter this Lenten journey may we each look at our lives in the mirror and ask ourselves, “What barriers in my life needs to be removed? What baggage holds me back or pulls me down in my spiritual walk?” Lent is a time to consider letting go of that baggage and offering it to God. I pray we may be strengthened in these days ahead to reflect on these questions and open these areas of our lives to the transformative work of the Holy Spirit.