

LENT 3-Year C

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord, Jesus Christ! As you've probably noticed we're kinda "decked-out" in a lot of Purple these days. That could only mean a couple of things: Advent or Lent. Well, since we already did Advent back in late November and early December, I'd say it means Lent.

And so, just exactly what is Lent? Well, according to the Episcopal Church Publishing Company's publication, *Daily Prayer for All Seasons*, "the word 'lent' comes from the Anglo-Saxon word, *lencton*, referring to the springtime of the year when the days grow longer and warmer and brighter. Lent emerged in our history as a season of final preparation for those who would be baptized at the Great Vigil of Easter. The entire Christian community was highly invested in walking alongside those who were about to commit their lives to Christ. In time, the season took on some extra layers of meaning, and many people now associate it with listening for a deeper awareness of our own sin-how we fall short of the ideals God sets before us-and the need for ongoing repentance and amendment of life. That said, joy in the new life we have found in the Christian faith should never be overwhelmed by our struggles to live out that faith or our awareness of the ways we fall short. We can see Lent as an opportunity to deepen our spiritual lives. In Lent we step back and consider the ways we need to repent, to turn around-to be converted."

And that brings me to this idea of Sin. It's my belief that Sin is-separation from God. Now, God saved my life. And, the Church was the instrument God used to save it. Becoming a victim of my own human

nature-my own humanity-I admittedly went out into the world and did some "Sinning!" And, I found out by doing so that I was separating myself from God. The more I did the deeper into darkness I went and the further distanced from God I became-I could feel it! But, by God's grace I turned back to the light of Christ found in the Church and found a peace surpassing comprehension-a family I could put my trust in-a loving community. When Moses was on mount Horeb he encountered God-a non-consuming light in the form of a burning bush. I believe that Moses' ability to come into contact with that light was due in part to his relatively low level of Sin and his faith in the great "I AM." In Paul's letter to the Corinthians we learned that the followers of this new "Way" were warned by Paul not to desire evil as did some of those in the wilderness with Moses, whom God struck down-idolaters who "sat down to eat and drink, and rose up to play." In today's Gospel lesson Jesus warns the Jews that unless they repent they will all perish just as did the Galileans whose blood was mixed by Pilate with their sacrifices; or like those killed by the tower of Siloam. He also shares the parable of the fig tree where the gardener pleads with the fig tree owner to allow the fig tree to be "...let alone for one more year, until I dig around it and put manure on it and if it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not...cut it down."

Each Sunday, probably each day, I dig the weeds out from around myself and re-nourish myself with faith and repentance, and God grants me one more day-one more year thanks to the loving grace of God through Christ my savior who through His glowing/majestic sacrifice has reconciled me-reconnected me with God.

God knows we mortals do not have the ability, on our own, to be free from Sin. The good news is that it's God's undeniable nature to love us- to forgive us-which is why He sent His only Son to sacrifice Himself and die for us-there's no greater love imaginable than that. God can't help loving us-forgiving us- it's God's nature-we Can't Fail!

God knows we will never be able to pay back this Great Debt, nor does God expect us to. It's my belief that God is happy when we accept the fact the Great I Am's grace is enough for us, and that we simply ask God to give us that grace to help us to love God and our neighbor. I believe that this is the only payment plan that God requires & craves.

And I wonder why I don't follow my own beliefs-why I believe, yet regularly need God to help me with my unbelief? I know I routinely make the mistake of thinking that I'm too undeserving of this Great sacrifice-this Great love. It's as though my stupid pride somehow keeps me from accepting God's forgiveness-like I see my sinful acts as being so exceptional, so great, that what God did for me is not enough to wipe away such sin. It's as though I'm saying, "Jesus, your dying that way was not enough to answer for what I have done." Wow! Think about that! Why do I do this when God routinely tells me, "Jim, why won't you just accept my love? My love, my grace are enough for you." And that's when I have to take a step back and accept that I am: A) a sinner, B) one who has repented and submitted to the saving Grace of Jesus the Christ, C) One whom Jesus has redeemed, D) One who continues to sin, E) One who still feels guilt. F) And, most importantly, One who God loves anyway. Now, feeling a little guilt is an asset in a way, for

it keeps me humble, and conscious of the fact that I am dependent on God's grace. I need to constantly be at the business of accepting myself... and of accepting Christ's sacrifice for Jim. I have to ask our Father to teach me to trust the spirit He has breathed into me, to open my eyes to his work, to give me the grace to believe His word, the word by which I am made His child. I have to ask Him to help me to understand that I belong to Him...even though I am undeserving of His love. I need to accept His help, to see His judgement and mercy in the suffering and resurrection of my Lord Jesus Christ. I have to ask Him to cause me to accept again this new life in Christ...the new life which He has given me by faith...to enable me to live without despair and without pride...to lead me to know with joy that He accepts me as a whole human being. Wow, Jim! How could it get much Better than that!

So, now that I've digested all that good news, I'd say it's my turn-I need to accept, to forgive. God is constantly sending me new people to love, but I find myself saying, "No thanks, Lord" to most of them. I don't think I hate anyone-that's a pretty strong word; but, there are people I don't like, or can't stand to be around. But, God loves those people with the same love He has for me. But forgiving, for us humans, is not always easy. Forgiving others means giving their imperfect humanity to God and admitting that the forgiving process cannot be done without God's help. He knows I can't love a person I despise with my own resources, but when I act to forgive that person and pray for good for him or her and ask God to fill me with divine love and compassion for that person Jesus can and does make it possible for me to love. And

that brings me back to this idea of Lent, the idea that we can see Lent as an opportunity to deepen our spiritual lives, to turn around-to be converted. As the Church, we are all members of the Body of Christ and God comes to us through each other. The eye cannot say to the hand, I have no need of you, nor again the head to the feet, I have no need of you. If all were a single member where would the Body be? An isolated Christian is a paralyzed Christian. As a community, the Body of Christ, the hands and feet of Christ in the world, we can use the power of God coming to us through each other to repent of our tendency to be isolated from each other and thereby from God and be a community of servants seeking not for ourselves but for the welfare of each other, and then take that same grace into the world and our neighbors-who like us are God's children.

In this way we become a sacramental body-the outward and visible sign of a collective inward and spiritual grace, which can't help but get folks' attention and curiosity about wanting to get in on a piece of our action. As our new presiding Bishop Curry said so eloquently in his acceptance sermon at the National Convention, we're not Jews or greeks, slaves or free; we're not republicans or democrats; we are The Jesus movement! And as members of the Jesus movement we are part of the march for social justice-the march toward the creation of the Kingdom of God here on earth. When we make the choice to become part of the Jesus movement, God's grace is with us to help us in our humanity-because with God all things are possible-what are we waiting for-God is with us! We Can't Fail!

As we walk this path through Lent watching the days grow warmer, longer, and brighter en-route to end of Lent and The Great Vigil of Easter, let us be ready and highly invested in walking alongside any our

community may have inspired to commit their lives to Christ-to be baptized into The Jesus Movement- The Body of Christ-and the march toward the pursuit of The Kingdom of God. Amen.