

Sermon for Sunday, March 1, 2020  
First Sunday in Lent, Year A  
Sermon Text(s): Genesis 2:15-17; 3:1-7, Matthew 4:1-11  
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The season of Lent invites us to take a step back from our regular routines and examine our hearts and actions. Are we giving of ourselves in the way that God calls us to do? Has our worship become empty and rote, devoid of heart-filled sincerity? Are we at peace with the ways we are practicing our faith and living it out in our lives?

But it doesn't stop there. Lent also invites us to consider the corporate sins and shortcomings of the country and culture in which we live.

Many of the things addressed in the Great Litany that we prayed at the beginning of the service today had to do not just with individual sins or sins of the church, but larger, systemic, cultural sins. The Litany of Penitence we prayed on Ash Wednesday (if you did the full service at 12:15) did so as well, in particularly poignant terms – praying for forgiveness for “our self-indulgent appetites and ways, and our exploitation of other people... our intemperate love of worldly goods and comforts... our blindness to human need and suffering, and our indifference to injustice and cruelty.”

The “our” in those prayers is much bigger than you or me or all of us in this church combined. It is an “our” that resonates with the wider American culture: our materialism that values things over people, our individualism that leads us to believe we need to care only for ourselves and our families and not for the wider community, and our obsession with violence that desensitizes us to the image of God in all people.

For our Lenten series this year, we've chosen to consider our collective shortcomings with regards to one specific petition in that Litany for Ash Wednesday: “our waste and pollution of your creation, and our lack of concern for those who come after us.” Climate change, some have argued, is the major moral issue of our time, and Lent seems an appropriate time to take stock of our actions in relationship to the earth and how God calls us to live.

In 2019, there were three major “climate strikes” led by youth – in March, May, and September. Youth have been walking out of class and holding rallies, trying to get “the grown ups” to pay attention to an issue they approach with an urgency that escapes many people in older generations.

In our study on the biblical prophet Jeremiah this fall, one Sunday I asked you all to get into groups and discuss what message Jeremiah might have for our world today. If Jeremiah was standing on a street corner with a sign today, what would it say? Many of you referenced climate change in your responses.

The prophets call us to pay attention to certain issues and to change our hearts and lives in relationship to them. By taking on climate change as our Lenten series, we are choosing to listen to the prophetic voices of today’s youth.

Climate change is by no means the only major moral issue in our country at the moment, however. Presiding Bishop Michael Curry recently joined with a group of Christian religious leaders to encourage us to observe Lent as a season of prayer for the “soul of our nation.”

This group of church leaders includes Evangelical, Roman Catholic, and mainline Protestant leaders who may have different perspectives on theological and political issues, but agree on two things:

- that they are committed to follow Jesus Christ and his way of love and
- that they are concerned about “the moral and spiritual health and wellbeing” of this country in a time of “profound division”

They are calling Christians of all types to fast on Wednesdays during Lent – and some intend to keep it up for the rest of the church year, until the start of Advent in December. This is important enough that I would like to read you some specific excerpts from their statement:

“We can no longer pretend otherwise: The United States is in the midst of a struggle for its very soul. Are we merely collections of self-interest and partisan identities or are we “one nation under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all?”

This is a moment of spiritual peril and decision. Nothing less than the soul of our nation is at stake.

On one level, the outward and visible form of the divisions and tensions among us as a nation are political, social, and even ideological. Yet, the deeper and invisible causes are spiritual and moral. When selfishness is exalted above sacrifice for the good of each other, the soul of the nation is at stake. When falsehood is exalted and truth is slain in the public square, the soul of the nation is at stake. When toxic politics manipulates public faith, the soul of the nation is at stake. When fear, hate, and violence shape our politics and anger governs our speech, the soul of the nation is at stake...

Now is not a time for playing the superficial politics of the right or the left. Now is a time for the deeper spiritual engagement with the realities that are beneath our conflicts in order that God might help and heal the “soul of the nation and the integrity of our faith”...

We pray to return to God’s two commandments on which hang all the law — to love God and love our neighbor.

“Love God with your whole heart, whole soul, and whole mind” — which means to repent and remove any national, racial, or political ideologies and idolatries that have replaced loving God with our whole selves.

“And love your neighbor as yourself” — which means to love all our neighbors that we have forgotten to love (no exceptions), including those who are different from us, who disagree with us, and, especially, those of another race or nationality whom we are directly instructed to love by the words and example of Jesus.

And we should also reach out, in particular, to those who are different from us or disagree with us politically, even in our same congregations and local communities...

We will fast in ways commensurate with our health, situation, and communities on one day per week — on Wednesdays beginning with Ash Wednesday.

Fasting weekly can help us to stop, pay attention, wake up, interrupt our schedules, go deeper, and listen for God and the Holy Spirit in ways that might lead us to new places in our hearts and minds. This weekly fast will begin in Lent and could continue until the Wednesday before Thanksgiving...

Through praying and fasting together, particularly with people who disagree politically, we hope to find actions that might bring more people together — even across the margins of previous voting blocs — so that we can find and pursue what is best for the country.”

Here at St. John’s, we will gather, as we have for many years, on Wednesday nights during Lent for a simple soup supper. I encourage you to answer Bishop Michael’s call to join this nationwide ecumenical movement and fast on Wednesdays, in whatever way works for you. You might abstain from all food and drink from sunrise until the time of our evening meal together. If you eat meat, you might make the decision to eat only vegetables and bread (a common Christian way of fasting) for the entire day on Wednesday but not stop eating altogether. The exact details are not as important as your intention to limit your food intake as an intentional way of focusing your attention on God and prayer.

If you are fasting on Wednesdays, I hope you will join in the evenings to break your fast with our Lenten soup suppers, and reflect on your experiences with brothers and sisters in Christ through the lens of the scriptural theme for that week.

The theme for this first week of Lent is **fear**, taken from the story of the fall and the story of Jesus’s temptation. Adam and Eve are afraid after they eat of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil: they hide themselves from God and cover their nakedness, both things they had not previously felt necessary to do. Jesus’s temptation in the wilderness is rooted in fear – the devil’s temptations to Jesus are for him to save himself, to make sure he has power over others.

The scriptural theme also happens to fit well with our Lenten series theme for this week as well – fear is a huge part of the climate change conversation, fear over what will happen if we do not change, fear for our very lives. We may also feel fear about engaging emotionally-charged, “hot button” topic in a church where we know we do not all hold the same political views.

Fear is also a driving force in the “national crisis” that our church leaders have called us to pray about, and fear-driven political messages will only increase in the months leading up to our next Presidential election.

Theologically speaking, the story of the fall from Genesis has some important truth to offer on this matter:

**Fear only entered Adam and Eve’s consciousness after the Fall.**

**Fear and shame are a consequence of sin.**

**Fear was not part of the world God intended to create for humanity.**

Perhaps this is why the single most common phrase uttered by the prophets and messengers of God when they appear to human beings is, “Do not be afraid!”

“Do not be afraid.” Let that be our mantra as we approach this season of prayer, fasting, and repentance. Do not be afraid to open yourself to hear God’s call to you. Do not be afraid to have open and honest conversations with your brothers and sisters in Christ about difficult topics. Do not be afraid to have hope for the future of our church, our nation and our world.