



Ash Wednesday February 22, 2007

Preaching: Rev. Ronni Verboom

Joel 2:1-2, 12-17a

“Let’s begin tonight”

Lent begins with Ash Wednesday, a day of cold dark ashes and a mood of serious repentance. Many of us wonder about Ash Wednesday and Lent- the forty days, not counting Sundays, leading us to Easter. What are these days about? Why do we observe them?

On the radio I once heard an announcer talking about Lent and what it’s for. He was taking calls from listeners who were sharing their understandings. Finally he got fed up and shouted, “Lent is a time you’re supposed to suffer! You’re supposed to FEEL BAD!!”

Is that why we’re here tonight? Are we entering a time of feeling bad? Do we decide what to “give up” for Lent in order to feel deprived? Do we have to suffer to pay for our sins?

No, we don’t. Lent is not a time to beat ourselves over the head for our brokenness. It’s not a time to wallow in shame or guilt. Lent is a time to OPEN OUR EYES. Lent is a time to OPEN OUR HEARTS.

Our culture teaches us many untruths. One untruth is that our lives should always be happy. We should always feel good. And there are millions of voices telling us they have what we need to feel good. We try various things offered, and we still don’t feel good. What to do?

Lent invites us to chuck all that “feeling good” chatter. Look at what really is, with open eyes.

When we open our eyes, we discover the truth: it's not hard to find "ashes" in our lives. First is the realization that we are mortal. We don't like to remember this, but the knowledge is there. Our bodies begin to wear out; friends and family members suffer illness and death. We know our earthly days are numbered. This life won't last forever.

Second, with open eyes we see clearly the pain and evil in this world. Fire sirens cry in the night, reminding us that homes, factories and lives end in ashes. Airplanes explode into ashes. War brings a fiery end to too many people: men, women and children. Our personal lives may dead-end into ashes: failed businesses, failed marriages, distance between friends, between parents and children. With open eyes we are reminded that in spite of our attempts to master the universe, or to simply master our own destructive, wrongheaded impulses, our lives are often out of control.

When we open our eyes, the cultural myth that everyone can feel good all the time, that life is basically hunky dory, crumbles into dust.

This presents us with another problem. Once we recognize the truths of sin and death, how do we face them with something other than despair?

This is where our Christian faith comes in. The Old Testament reading from Joel reminds us that we can return to God with "weeping and mourning". Belief in God's love, mercy and forgiveness permits us to be honest with him. With tears in our eyes, we can begin again. With God there is always another chance beyond forgiveness, through Christ who paid for our sins. With God there is always healing for our pain. With God, there is victory over all sin and even ultimate victory over death.

We need to let God into the depths of the hurt within us, sharing our anguish, anger, guilt and remorse. There, deep in our open hearts, God's forgiveness and healing can be felt.

In the darkness of winter, in the darkness of sin and death, in the darkness of our hearts, God lights a tiny Easter flame. Then, hope begins anew. Green shoots do grow out of the ashes of burned fields, don't they? God promises a new flame, where we expect only darkness. Open your eyes. Open your hearts. Let's begin tonight.

Isaiah 40:3

What is your plan for a **NEW BEGINNING**?

Possibilities:

SIMPLIFY YOUR LIFE

- slow down
- spend more time alone (pray, rest, think, feel)
- spend more time with family and friends
- spend less time shopping, watching TV, munching snacks

REFLECT ON GOD'S LOVE FOR YOU

- hang a cross where you can see it every day
- remember Jesus' gift of his life for you
- plant seeds or bulbs as symbols of new beginnings, eternal life

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- Matthew 21:22

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- What is your plan for **A LIFE OF PRAYER**?

Possibilities:

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GET RID OF DISTRACTIONS

- What distracts you from listening to your heart?
- noise? Turn off TV, radio, phone
- piles of laundry? Go outside, or into another room
- kids? Get a sitter; exchange sitting with a neighbor
- plan time alone at home

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WRITE DOWN what you want to say to God.

TALK TO GOD OUT LOUD

- in the shower
- in the car
- with a friend

James 2:14 and Matthew 19:19

What is your plan for **A LIFE OF FASTING AND SERVICE**?

Possibilities:

PREPARE SIMPLE MEALS

- soups, stews, salads, less meat and processed foods
- share the money saved

USE LESS ENERGY—walk, bike, carpool

RECYCLE; CONSERVE WATER—shorter showers

CLEAN OUT CLOSETS- donate items to Rummage Sale

HELP A NEIGHBOR WITH CHORES

BE A BIG BROTHER/BIG SISTER

HELP WITH MEALS FOR LAZARUS HOUSE

Ephesians 4:32

What is your plan for **A LIFE OF FORGIVENESS?**

Possibilities:

PRAY- asking for and receiving God's forgiveness for your own sins

ASK someone you've hurt for FORGIVENESS

TELL family & friends you love them

REFLECT on WHAT TEMPTS YOU – lean on God for help & strength; learn compassion for fellow strugglers.

LEARN ABOUT PEACEMAKING – personal and world

Psalms 86:15

What is your plan for **A LIFE OF FAITH?**

Possibilities:

TELL OTHERS ABOUT HOW GOD HAS CHANGED YOUR LIFE- how and why you decided to follow Jesus

WRITE DOWN, or TELL A FRIEND about things that have strengthened your faith

PRAY- asking God to strengthen your faith.

READ about Jesus in the Bible—what do you like that he said and did?

PARTICIPATE in the life of the church

SCRIPTURES:

Isaiah 40:3

In the wilderness, prepare the way of the Lord. Make straight in the desert a highway for our God.

Matthew 21:22

Whatever you ask for in prayer with faith, you will receive.

James 2:14

What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works?

Matthew 19:19

You shall love your neighbor as yourself.

Ephesians 4:32

Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you.

Psalms 86: 15

But you, O Lord, are a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness.