

Contribution: An Opening to God

*Sermon preached by the Rev. F. M. "Buddy" Stallings, Vicar,
at the noon service, March 9, 2011, The First Day of Lent: Ash Wednesday.
Based on Joel 2:1-2, 12-17 and Matthew 6:1-6, 16-2.*

Maybe it is age. I don't know. But for some reason every year Ash Wednesday gets more and more meaningful to me. It is not that I am increasingly penitential; I am about as penitential as I have ever been, somewhere on the scale between "Yippee, I am a happy child of God," and "Yikes, I am a worm and no man." What is increasingly meaningful to me is to be a part of the great devotional urge or impulse that comes over this city on Ash Wednesday. I am not naïve about how deep or shallow it may or may not be, or about the creeping superstition that age and religion may bring to such devotion—mine or anyone else's. I am touched—purely and simply—because throngs of people demonstrate their desire for God. There is something terribly right about that.

A parish I once served part-time—on another coast overlooking the Pacific, not to put too fine a point on it—was an artsy sort of place filled with wonderful and interesting people, theatrical types, poised just on the line between delightful and strange! For Lent, the altar was stripped of all but the bare essentials. That is not a problem; Lent is solemn, certainly solemn-ish. But stripping was just the beginning. The *entire* sanctuary was draped with beige, sand colored gauze-like fabric and adorned with sticks—dry, dead, grim, big sticks. The purpose, of course, was to suggest a barren desert, a journey on the way to the resurrection. Frankly, I found it less reflective than scary. Every time I entered the room I found myself thinking that I had wandered into a post-apocalyptic movie set and that any moment Kevin Cosner would materialize with machete in hand either to kill me or lead me to safety! And I was never sure which I preferred!

We don't do that here, and with an increasingly large measure of certainty I can say that we never shall, not in the near future. But we need to be careful lest we do our own version of it. Here is the danger of this day and the season it hearkens: in our desire to get it right, we sometimes confuse authentic religious practice for stirring up guilt instead of engendering repentance; for feeling regret and shame instead of devoting ourselves to newness of life; for making dreary, laborious confessions rather than feeling the great gift of God's grace and forgiveness. My experience of the people of God is not that we need more guilt but that we need to let God remove the guilt from us so that we can begin to live as the people of redemption God calls us to be. If guilt were going to change the world—or fill churches for that matter—it already would have done so.

At its best, Lent is *not* the enshrinement of guilt. It is not about groveling. When we grovel before God, the groveling is about us, not about God. Yes, God loves a contrite heart but not for the sake of contrition. God uses contrition as a brief passageway to amendment of life, as we once called it, a path to holier, happier lives, lives that sometimes pulsate with passion and purpose and sometimes luxuriate with the power of the ordinary.

The first liturgy of the season of Lent startles us more than a bit if it works well, refocusing us, waking us up. In a few minutes we are going to confess our pride, hypocrisy, impatience, self-indulgent appetites and ways, intemperate love of worldly goods, negligence in worship, prejudice, waste and pollution. And that is just part of the list. Is every one of us in this room guilty of each one of those acts? Absolutely beyond a shadow of a doubt we are. God knows it, and we know it. We know that God has made us in a way that calls us to be more than we often are and certainly different from the way we often comport ourselves. Both God and we know profoundly that we miss the mark; our confession is never news to God or to us. So when we confess these multitudes of shortcomings in our Litany of Penitence, which follows very shortly, we list them not to wallow in them but to acknowledge them, to seek forgiveness for them, and to resolve to move from them into a life of more faithful living. If indeed we do make the choice to give up something for Lent, at least let's be clear that the nag of the desire we will experience for whatever we have given up is to give us the impetus to move toward something, not away from something. You may argue that what I am saying is a matter of pure semantics, and maybe it is. But the wreckage of people—and trust me, I have seen it in my line of work—whose lives have been damaged by guilt that doesn't change them is widespread enough that it bears being observed—especially on a day when we put black ashes on our foreheads!

If Lent can be observed with honest assessment of our lives but within the reflection of what we know and hope to be true about God's grace, **then** we can have a truly holy Lent. So in a moment when you hear that you have come from dust and are headed back to it, also recall what a children's liturgist reminds our children on this day: "Remember that you belong to God, and that God loves you." Be pensive, be thoughtful, pray till you drop; just don't be miserable. God doesn't trade in misery; God delivers us from misery.

In the name of God: *Amen.*

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