

Pastor Gail Duba
Lent 1 C

Sin, Like Ashes in our Eyes

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Luke 4:1-13

The ashes are gone – washed off our foreheads – but their darkness still stains our thoughts and spirits as we begin Lent once again. Tiny grains of ash, like the darkness of sin, may have fallen in our eyes or down our faces. Annoyed, we may have rubbed our eyes or brushed our cheeks. The ash was wet, but I use healing oil when I mix the ashes, to let you know that God heals as well. How can we get it off, without looking insincere, before we get in our cars and go to work out in the real world where most people don't even know it's Ash Wednesday, where most people no longer remember the word "Lent" or what it means? Sin is like that most days, a bit of an annoyance, a speck in our eyes that must be rubbed away. For heaven's sake, we don't want to talk about it – it's annoying – oh my, that word again. Being reminded that sin still exists in each one of us can be just plain annoying, not earth-shattering, nothing really to worry about, it's just there hovering around the edges, picking at us, especially during Lent. We have 40 long days to think about it, though. Forty long days when we're reminded to repent and be saved. Our hymns are melancholy. In the liturgical churches, like Episcopal & Lutheran, we don't even say the word or sing "Alleluia" until Easter Day.

Is that what Lent is all about? A surface look at it, a few memories from Sunday school in our youth, a desire to get it over with and get back to the real world, might make it seem less significant. But look at our readings today. If we really pay attention to what we're hearing, there is a whole lot more light than darkness – a whole lot more graciousness poured on us by our God, than punishment. Yes, we're reminded about the temptations of sin, but we're offered the unstopping gift of forgiveness and a chance to model our lives after Jesus'. Lent can help us go deep into ourselves.

Moses' story today is full of light. God has given the Israelites a land flowing with milk and honey. All they have to do is show gratitude through their offerings. "A land flowing with milk and honey" is an image of peace and beauty. The people acknowledged their rescue from the Egyptians by the God who heard their cries of affliction. Today's psalm says, "God will command his angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways, on their hands they will bear you up." This is another image that reminds us that God continues to hear our cries, even when they're moaned from the depths of our sadness. At the beginning of Lent, we're reminded that we are not alone. God not only has not abandoned us, God is "so bound to us in love" the psalm says, that even when we are focused only on ourselves to the point of sin, God is with us, ready to bring us back to the light. God is ready to brush the ash from our faces. Paul says the same thing to the Romans. "The word is near you, on your lips and in your heart." That is not only the word of faith, but the capital W "Word" of God. "You will be saved," he says, "everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord will be saved." Is there any better news than that?

Paul does put in front of us, however, one type of sin we may need to think about during Lent – because after all, this good news of salvation is reliant on the fact that we actually want to repent and return to the Lord. Paul drops in a very salient fact: “There is no distinction between Jew and Greek, the same Lord is Lord of all and is generous to all who call on him.” This speaks to us of God’s inclusion of all people – no exceptions. We might need to examine ourselves to determine how much we really want to include all others.

Is that part of the ash that has fallen in our eyes? We might need help getting that out. We might need to read over and over again Jesus’ words all through the gospels that call us to love even our enemies. “Our enemies?” we might want to ask. It’s hard enough to love our own families sometimes.

But if that ash is left in our eye, it could fester and make us blind – blind to our responsibility to share God’s love with everyone. This is a good time to remember that for the Jews, “love” doesn’t mean eros, the Valentine’s-Day-card emotional kind of love. Agape love, when Jesus talks about it, also means “loyalty.” We don’t have to agree with everyone to love them. We don’t have to have emotional love for the person. Even the group doing evil needs our prayers for them to change. “Loyalty” means we acknowledge that these too are children of God and need our prayers. They need us to want them to see the light, not for us to judge them as worthy only for hell. Even Jesus didn’t send his tempter immediately to hell in our gospel story. Isn’t it interesting that Jesus only responds to the temptations by reminding his tempter that God alone is worthy of our worship and service? There was no argument, no discussion: God alone is our refuge and our stronghold in times of trial.

The three temptations are interesting in themselves. Would it have been so wrong if Jesus just turned a few stones to bread? Certainly, there’s no sin in that. What is Luke really telling us? Perhaps, we might be tempted to want to manipulate the world to our liking. That can grow into the serious sin, for example, of not caring where our food comes from, or the environment from which it grew. If we are not careful we might want to control all things in our world, which could be terrible for God’s creation.

Jesus’ second temptation might make us think about what we feel we must own. What in our lifestyles comes before our consideration of God? If we’re honest, many things can draw our eyes away from God – things that, in and of themselves, are not bad, but things, such as that annoying speck of ash that fell in our eyes, that might fester in us until we can see nothing else. The list of offenses is unending but the answer that Jesus provides takes us back to the original commandment to worship the one God, the Creator. Imagine a world where the leaders prayed constantly, “Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.”

Following the wilderness, Jesus would spend the rest of his short life turning aside from all temptations to put himself first. Even when someone calls him good he says, "No one is good but the Father." At every instance of living he was connected to God by prayer, and because of that he did not falter. People marvel at Jesus' authority, but he knew that he acted on God's authority.

The third temptation is even more intriguing because the Tempter, Satan, the Devil, whichever name you prefer for the power that opposes God, this tempter uses Scripture to accomplish his purpose. Listen to the false prophets, to those who make money by taking advantage of the poor, listen to them and hear how they too use Scripture to accomplish their dark purposes. "Take a chance with your life," the tempter says to Jesus. "No matter what chances you take, God is supposed to take care of you. You are a favorite of God's, aren't you?" There is in all of us a tendency to bargain with God and a great temptation to misuse scripture for our own purposes. Out of such misuse, wars have arisen. Jesus is adamant on this: You shall not put your God to the test.

Both Matthew and Luke agree that when, finally, the terrible temptations were finished and the tempter left him alone he did so only for a while. "Until an opportune time," Luke writes. Because Jesus was fully human as well as fully divine, he would be tempted again. There is that heart-breaking time when Peter tries to dissuade him from following the road that would lead to his death. After all, the tradition did not say anything about Messiah suffering & dying! But Jesus hears in Peter's rebuke, the echo of Satan's temptation: "Get thee behind me, Satan," Jesus said to Peter, a stinging rebuke. Once again Jesus turns away from the temptation, knowing that his own way of obedience to God would lead to his death.

This is how the season of Lent begins, with the victory of Jesus over temptation. The knowledge that he belongs to God & to God alone keeps him from succumbing to any thought that he might rely on his own powers. The knowledge of Scriptures, of the words of the Lord, as Jesus describes them, becomes a shield to protect him from the meddling of the tempter. Jesus' connection is never torn because, in prayer, he always turns to God. May it be so with us. Jesus knows what we face. Jesus knows the power that tries to turn our hearts from God. Our ashes remind us of the same thing, but today we hear about God's great love for us. We're reminded even more about the fact that we abide under the shadow of the Almighty. We, too, have been promised a land flowing with milk and honey. There is a lot to be joyful about in Lent. After all, Paul tells us, "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved." Amen.