

Joel 2:1-2, 12-17

2 Corinthians 5:20b-6:10

Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

Psalm 103 or 103:8-14

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God's Beloved

It seems a bit strange to have Ash Wednesday and Valentine's Day fall on the same date. I have somber images of the smudged ashen cross we will soon bear on our foreheads. I also have as fun memories of those tiny, pastel heart-shaped candies with "I love you" and "Be Mine" and other endearments stamped on them. The more I thought about it the more I realized that maybe this is not such a strange pairing of images after all. After all, life is about love, the heart and the cross.

Today we begin our forty day Lenten journey. Jesus heads off into the wilderness after his baptism by his cousin John in the River Jordan to figure just who he is and what this has to do with his relationship with God. As followers of Jesus you and I are called to do the same. Just who is the person God has created you and me to be? Are we becoming our true self, our best self? Where is God in this equation? It took Jesus forty days to figure this out and I suspect a bit longer. I dare say it will take us considerably longer to work all this out, maybe our entire lifetime or even then some. We do have eternity, after all. The good news in all of this is that we are not alone. Ash Wednesday is a powerful reminder of our connection to God and each other. No matter where you are in life at this moment, whether you feel have made a royal mess of things; or maybe you are overwhelmed with loneliness, fear or anxiety; or, maybe things seem to be going pretty well, we can be assured that wherever we are on our spiritual journey God is with us.

The blackened smudged cross is a stark reminder that we all must face the eventuality of our death. "You are dust and to dust you will return" (BCP, 265). But, there is more. The ashen cross also reminds us of who we truly are. At our baptism we were each marked with another cross on our foreheads, "You are sealed by the Holy Spirit in baptism and marked as Christ's own forever" (BCP, 308). This is our true identity. We belong to God. God first loved us into being. Nothing can destroy or sever this love, not even death itself. Today we confront our mortality but we are also affirm that we are God's beloved. "You are mine saith the Lord" (Isaiah 43:1). God will never let us go.

A few weeks ago I returned from a retreat on in rural Massachusetts. The retreat house, a lovely salt box farm house built in the mid 1700's, is surrounded by several acres that border a high bluff overlooking the Merrimack River below. One day during a morning walk I came upon the remains of what once was a grand estate and now it is part of a state park. In its heyday it was comprised of a stately house, formal gardens, stables and a number of smaller houses spread over several acres, enclosed by the low stone

walls that are so typical of the New England countryside. All that remains today is the stone foundation of what once was a stately and grand home. A few shrubberies have managed to survive the harsh winters that suggest what once must have been a grand garden. These are all remnants of what was and is no longer.

As I slowly walked the snow covered grounds I tried to imagine what life must have been like generations ago. The lively summer parties on the grand porch that overlooked the river below. The neighing of horses that were fed and groomed in the stables nearby. Today there is only the sound of the wind as the winter sun emerges from behind the low, leadened clouds. I was struck by how quiet it was as nature reclaims the estate, bit by bit, with its persistent beauty. As I stood still and slowly surveyed the frozen grounds I was awed by the holiness of this patch of dirt on God's good earth. God seemed to be hovering over this austere landscape that morning. The remnants of another era, another lifetime, on this hallowed ground was a stark reminder of our impermanence and that life is a gift to be treasured. *Our bodies, our lives are tangible evidence of God's love for us.* We are dust and to dust we shall return.

Every breath we take is a gift from God. And, when we breath our last we will return to the very source that gave us life. We journey home to God. Several years ago I knew an elderly man who had been ill in the hospital for a long period of time. Over the past several weeks we had shared a great deal about faith and God during his hospitalization in time his body began to shut down. During our last visit he told me that he made the decision to stop all treatment and to "go home." I responded, "You don't mean your house do you?" He smiled. It was the first time I had seen him smile since he came to the hospital. He said, "No, I am ready to go home." We both understood without sharing another word that he meant to go home to God. This was his final journey. We are dust and to dust we shall return.

Lent is when we set some time apart from our over scheduled, daily lives and give this time to God. Whether it is sitting in silence and listening for the still, small voice of God, or taking daily walks while praying, reading poetry, fasting on Fridays or giving up chocolate. Whether we take something on or give something up, the real issue is how we can use this time to better know our true selves through prayer and reflection while deepening our relationship with God.

As we go out into the world with the blackened ashes smudged on our foreheads we are assured that there is more to this earthly life than what we can hope or imagine. You and I belong to God and to God we shall return. God has a stake on our lives and will never leave us to face our troubles alone.¹ This is where we place our trust and stake our very lives. And, who knows, we may find one of those pastel candy hearts with "You are God's beloved" stamped on it!

May you be blessed with a holy Lent.
Amen

¹ Thomas Merton, taken from his prayer, known as the *Thomas Merton Prayer*.