

Lent 4 March 15, 2015

Earlier this week I was over at Christ Church in Montpelier for a meeting. I quickly stopped by the office of Paul Habersang, the pastor there, just to say hi. I noticed he had on his door a poster that said, “40 Things You Can Do for Lent.” It had suggestions like, “Pray,” “Read the Bible,” “Call up a home bound senior,” many of the things actually, that people here at Good Shepherd had put up on the white board in Epiphany about “What I did this week to live out my Baptismal vows.” I don’t know why, maybe because I was thinking that about the way the list on the poster was so similar to our list, but for whatever reason the significance of the “40” in the “40 Things You Can Do for Lent,” totally escaped me, and a little while later I has one of those Homer Simpson moments, “D’oh:” right, there’s 40 days in Lent!

Prayer: Most merciful God, in the midst of this Lenten time, your Word speaks to us of your mercy and deliverance. May that word of mercy and deliverance enliven our souls this day; this we ask in the Name of Jesus our savior and friend. Amen.

This week we passed the halfway mark in Lent; today is the 26th day out of the 40 days that comprise this season of Lent. We started together on Ash Wednesday during those sub-freezing days of February, and now we have come to the Ides of March. These days are especially set aside for us as days of preparation for the time of the great mysteries and celebration during Holy Week, a way to use the gift of time given to us to focus our lives and our souls more closely around the dramatic events of the final days of Jesus’ earthly ministry and his taking up the way of the cross. Like the Advent season of four weeks we marked together a couple of months ago, we are once again bid by the church to get ready spiritually as soon together we will do something special in the observance of one of the great festivals in the life of the church.

Now I don’t know about you, but I have to admit having a more difficult time than usual in paying serious attention to Lent this year. I do, however, have the sense that I am not alone in this regard. I think that for many of us, paying close attention to our spiritual selves is not our highest priority. One thing of which we are all aware, of course, is the weather and the deep freeze we’ve all been through, and that has certainly taken its toll; it is hard to think about the state of your soul before the almighty when you’re freezing your tail off, when you’re worried about

if you've got enough wood for heating to last the rest of the winter, when you are just so cold through and through that you just can't get your brain to kick in gear. That's, of course, all very understandable, and I think maybe accounts for some of the reason I have had a more distracted Lent than usual, but I kind of suspect that blaming the weather, as much as it is such a current topic of conversation and fascination for us here in Vermont, I sort of think that blaming the weather is a little too easy in this case.

In my life I know there are several significant events that have made this a more distracted Lent than usual. As most of you all know, I had a good friend from seminary who hit while riding his bike and died just before Christmas. Jonathan, who visited here on my first Sunday at Good Shepherd, was a caring Episcopal priest, a loving father and husband and a wonderful friend and his sudden tragic death was a great shock to all of us in his circle of friends. And then much more recently Elizabeth and I lost a nephew, a very good kid just 22 years old in another tragic accident. And let me take a minute to thank you all for your prayers and expressions of kindness at Fenton's death. All the love and support you and so many others demonstrated throughout this sad time helped to soften pain and distress of this awful loss. I really appreciate it and thank you all so much. Thank you.

So I think for myself, but for others as well, this Lent takes place against the backdrop of those larger questions of life; questions of sorrow and pain, questions of death and loss; or perhaps questions that might not be surrounded by wounds quite so raw and tears quite so bitter, but questions nevertheless forced on us by the times in which we live: the Middle East still in crisis and people dying everyday in the ceaseless fighting, the lives of millions disrupted and sent into exile in overcrowded refugee camps; again Ebola has come back into our headlines and death and suffering caused by this frightening disease still continues to steal the lives of our West African sisters and brothers; and of course closer to home the continued racial polarization in our nation always lurks there in the background, so although we celebrate the courage and dedication of those who marched for Civil Rights 50 years ago in Selma, Alabama as we commemorate that anniversary, and yet in present day Ferguson, Missouri still smolders with hatred as the Justice Department report indicts the racist oppression of the local government and police department, but just as outrageous was the shooting of two police officers this week as well. And here in Central Vermont, our economy is still fairly stagnant and too

many of our children are growing up in poverty, without some of the advantages we know will enable them to grow and thrive.

So now that I've got you totally depressed...but it is depressing and it is difficult: we do not live in easy times, but then again, very few people ever have throughout human history. Now we certainly can just stay depressed: just stay in bad, cover our heads with the pillow and try to ride it out. Or we could just keep our heads down and try to move forward in life not paying any attention, or at least as little as possible, to the suffering and chaos that reigns around us. I think that's what a lot of people do, and God bless 'em, that might be a way to get through life, but I'm not really sure it qualifies as living. But since we are here this morning, getting up on a Sunday when we could have just as easily burrowed down under the quilts, coming here to Good Shepherd, we, you and I, we are looking for something more: indeed maybe we haven't kept up our Lenten resolves very well, maybe this year it has been harder to observe a Holy Lent, but we know that our spirits long for a deeper life, a fuller life, a life full of the richness of Christ's love and peace. Yes, yes, we know that this love of Christ, this peace of Christ does not mean an easy life, but it means a life that brings us into communion with each other and with God who calls us together. It is about heeding a call, a call that enables us to see that there is a bread that gives us life, a fullness and abundance of life. We come together this morning to gather around this table with the promise to be fed, for our lives to be given the abundance of God's love and care, despite the troubles that may be found in our lives or that might surround us in this world. We come this morning, not for the first time in our lives, not for the first time in Lent and not, of course, for the first time hearing those familiar words of John 3:16, "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life." This is about accepting God's hand stretched out to us, taking that gracious gift for our lives, knowing as John went on to write, "Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him." Indeed, God reaches out to meet us in the midst of our suffering in the world, in the midst of the violence and tragedy of the world to give us life, to replenish our spirits.

And then God calls us to more as well: God calls us to share that same Good News by reaching out just as God has reached out to us in Jesus; God calls us to renew our spirits through those acts of mercy and kindness, through our working for social justice and peace, respecting the dignity of every human being. This is why

we undertake these Lenten disciplines, to grow spiritually and to grow closer to God in God's great mercy and love...and yes, even if you have been like me, there is still time: there is still time my sisters and brothers to live a Holy Lent, to open up our spirits to God's never failing love; time even in the midst of busy lives and a world full of violence and dread to move ourselves closer to God. Take these remaining days of Lent, take the gift of this time given to us and use it to move closer to God, to renew and refresh your soul by sharing the Good News of Jesus with others in your acts of mercy, kindness and justice in this world. And may you be strengthened in this resolve, in this love by the very spirit of Christ. Thanks be to God. Amen.