

***Welcome to the season called Lent.***

Lent has been a part of the Christian church for a long time. It includes the 40 days, minus Sundays, leading to Easter, and it's considered a time to prepare us for the celebration of Jesus' resurrection.

Some people associate Lent with a time to give something up. Perhaps you've even been asked (or asked yourself) what you might give up for lent? Chocolate, beer or television? Whether you are giving something up – or not - let's be honest about why we're doing it.

God bless you if you're committed to generosity, to coming to God in prayer and denying yourselves and fasting in order to focus on God. These are great spiritual disciplines – Go for it! Jesus certainly wasn't telling his disciples to avoid these practices in the gospel today.

He was saying approach them with ***the right heart*** and ***right mind-set*** so that they are a blessing to you. It's hard to comprehend how these things could be a hindrance – but if they're done simply for outward appearances **we can make** the good gifts of God something of an obstacle in our own journey.

I think the big question for us tonight is, ***"How do we best use this season of Lent? What's our focus as we prepare for the passion, death and ultimately the resurrection of Jesus for us?"***

Often, when we think of preparation, we think of externals.

If we are preparing for company, we dust and vacuum and if we're really in a tizz - cram our mess into drawers and under spare beds. We pretty it all up on the outside, and pray no one looks in those drawers.

**But when it comes to preparing for Jesus at Easter, we're talking about internal preparation, not external.**

Jesus makes a big deal about internal things in our reading from Matthew. He is essentially warning us to not give in to the temptation of focusing our faith journey on impressing others.

He's saying ***"don't give in to the temptation of giving so that others can see how generous we are."***

Also, don't give in to the temptation of praying loudly and eloquently so that people think we're more spiritual than other people.

He's saying don't be tempted, when fasting, to make a big show of the fact that we're not eating. You might get the applause or admiration of people, but that's all those actions accomplish; applause and admiration of people. **They do nothing for our spiritual journey.**

At the end of the day, Jesus is interested in our hearts, not rigid obedience to some form of discipline. So if we give and when we pray and if we fast – these are good spiritual disciplines that flow out of grateful hearts for what God has done in our lives.

God isn't impressed with people who simply go through the motions, patting themselves on the back and hoping that others will too. Jesus wants more for us than worldly applause and admiration.

So how do we best use this season of Lent, this season of preparation? How do we best spend these 40 days as followers of Jesus?

The best starting point I know of (from my life) comes out of Psalm 51: **we practice the discipline of confession.** Ultimately it's sin that drives a wedge between all of us and God isn't it?

So why not spend these 40 days in honest conversation with God, watching as He ***cleans the clutter and mess*** we've allowed to get in the way of our faith journey as he forgives us and washes us clean.

Psalm 51 is helpful in leading us in that direction.

You know the story and setting of the psalm – I mentioned it a few weeks back: *David has an affair with another man's wife, gets her pregnant, tries to cover it up, and when that doesn't work, he arranges to have the woman's husband killed. Remember now?*

We can read David's story and think, "What a fool. How could he do such a thing? I'd never do that."

**Maybe,** but we all hide sin in our lives: sins of thought, word and deed, things we have done and things we have left undone.

Which is why, even though our sin may not be the same as David's, his response to the sin in his life can teach us something too.

**First, confession begins with a change of heart.**

In the first two verses of Psalm 51, David begs for forgiveness, then says, *"For I know my transgressions, and my sin is always before me. Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight."*

For the longest time, David had hidden his sin, denying that it was a problem. But God, through the prophet Nathan, confronts David with **His powerful, spirit filled word**, and gives him an opportunity to change his mind.

And David does.

He goes from denial to deep conviction and sadness.

**He has a change of heart.**

When we're confronted with the word of God, it often touches close to home – it hits our conscience like a raw nerve. It can be uncomfortable.

***But it does something*** – something that's good for us too! God's word has the power to move us from denial to conviction and sadness for the sin in our own lives.

*Every now and again we're all confronted with the need to apologize. It can be hard work too! And whether we're apologizing or receiving the apology it's so easy to tell from the tone of voice and body language whether those words, "I'm sorry," really reflect a change of heart.*

*There's the short "I'm sorry" and the more convincing, "I'm sorry."*

In our relationships with others and our relationship with God, confession begins with a genuine change of heart.

- As long as we try to justify our sin,
- or pretend it really isn't so bad,
- or seek to explain why it really isn't sin,
- or hold onto a defiant attitude,

our sin stands in the way of our journey following Jesus.

**Confession begins with a change of heart. That's the power of the word – and let's call it what it is – a miracle.**

**And it continues with a change of mind.**

Lent gives us the opportunity to change our mind about who is responsible for the sin in our lives.

David gave in to temptation and admitted it. David could've said,

- ***"It was Bethsheba's fault; look what she was wearing at the time."***
- Or he could blame God.
- Or he could blame his other wives (he had many of them) for not being sensitive to his needs.

He could place blame in several different areas, but he realizes that it is now time to take responsibility for his actions.

That's why he says in verse 4, *"Against you, you only, have I sinned. You are proved right when you speak and justified when you judge. I have been a sinner from birth."*

**David is saying, "I am responsible for my actions. I can't blame anyone but myself." [PAUSE]**

Confession which clears the obstacles in our way as we follow Jesus and walk the way of the cross, calls for:

1. a change of heart,
2. a change of mind,
3. and finally a change of direction.

**The first move here is always God's move towards us.**

Listen again to his words, *"Cleanse me ... wash me ... blot out all my iniquity ... create in me a clean heart ... renew a steadfast/right spirit within me."*

We can mess things up on our own without anyone's help, but it takes an act of God to get us back on the right path.

God effects a change of direction in our lives.

That's what we see in Jesus.

Jesus not only redirects us, he also cleanses us, and washes us, and forgives us.

**It's God's move toward us through His Son.**

Try as we might to clean ourselves up and make ourselves "good" so that we will be acceptable to God, it simply doesn't work that way.

God does that for us in the person of Jesus – and he comes to us right where we are and **just as we are.**

***Only God loves us too much to leave us just as we are.***

The bible says, ***"He is faithful and just to forgive us and cleanse us from all unrighteousness."***

God is faithful, God forgives, God cleanses you from all unrighteousness.

**Confession isn't easy or pleasant.** It requires a level of honesty and vulnerability that doesn't come naturally to us.

**But it is God's pathway to a closer walk with him.**

So come tonight, honest with yourself *about yourself*. And honest with God, too – remembering that He is faithful!

Let the ashes remind you that you have been marked with the sign of the cross – the sign of sins forgiven and eternal life.

Let's walk the way of the cross together as God opens the draws of our lives and clears out the clutter through open and honest confession.

And as we do that, may God remind you that he knows your frailty, and in response He died for you, he draws close to you so that you are able to draw close to Him.

So come now and receive his cleansing and refreshing body and blood in bread and wine -

**Come, taste and see that the Lord is good.**

Jesus is the host of this banquet where heaven meets earth. Come as Jesus, the faithful one puts life and salvation into your hands once more, Amen.