

The Journey Before Us

This Sunday is the first Sunday in Lent, and I want to take some time this morning to lay out the Lenten journey we are invited to embark upon. First of all, I need to tell you that this is totally voluntary. Observing a period of Lent before Easter is not one of the Ten commandments. Nor did Jesus Christ ordain it. It is not an Ordinance of our denomination. The voices which invite us to observe Lent come instead from the millions and millions of Christians who have found value in this journey throughout the almost 2000 years since the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Whether we decide to accept their invitation is entirely up to us, but their persistence in observing Lent is compelling. If they have found it worth doing, there must be something here for us as well. What might we expect from participating in the Lenten journey? What might you and I expect to gain from participating in this 40 day journey?

It seems to me that one of the first things we might expect is to gain a deeper appreciation for the price God paid to show us His love and to assure us that we can be forgiven and cleansed of sin. As the title of our Lenten devotional this year suggests, a central focus of these 40 days before Easter is the cross. And, we cannot think about the cross without also remembering the images of suffering that it brings to mind. Jesus suffered and died on the cross as a sacrifice, the sacrifice, for our sins.

And, while Jesus is always the central figure of the cross, we are reminded by the writer of Hebrews that He is not the only figure. There were many before Jesus who remained faithful to God and were persecuted and killed because of it; many of the Old Testament prophets, in particular, suffered and some were killed because of their faithfulness to the Word of God. John the Baptist was beheaded. Likewise, there have been millions since Jesus who have suffered and have paid the ultimate price for remaining true to Him. Thus, the blood flowing from that old rugged cross flows in both directions; it reaches back into the past and forward into the future. Many Christians fast and deny themselves of other pleasures or privileges during Lent to remind themselves of the cross, and to be in tune with its sufferings. As we draw near to His sufferings one thing becomes clear: **We are bought at a great price; therefore, we must be of great worth to God.**

The first thing we may expect to gain from participating in Lent is a greater assurance of God's love for us and a greater assurance of our forgiveness. A second thing we may expect to gain is the assurance that we do not make this journey alone. Hebrews 12:1a says,

2

"Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses;" these are witnesses which testify to the fact that no matter how hard it is or how costly it becomes to remain faithful to God, it is worth it. They tell us that the joy of knowing the Lord and the blessings that flow from the cross He bore or from the crosses we bear, are far greater than the sufferings. Paul puts it this way: in Romans 8:18, he says, "I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us." The witnesses of Hebrews 12:1 and the witnesses who have come later, urge us to suffer courageously and to embrace the growing glory, knowing that we are not alone. The Lord is with us and we are surrounded by a host of others who have made this journey.

As we participate in Lent we may hope to experience God's love and forgiveness more deeply, and a closer fellowship with our great Christian family. A third treasure we may hope to find on our Lenten journey is a more complete release from those things that keep us from drawing closer to the Lord. The second half of Hebrews 12 (based on the testimony of the great cloud of witnesses which surround us) says, "Let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us."

The Lenten season is a time to come to grips with the hindrances and entangling sin that keep us from making steady progress on our journey to become more like Jesus. It is a time for self-examination under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. One of the things we need to keep in mind is that we are often blind to our own flaws, especially the really deep ones. Left on our own we are apt to think to ourselves, "man, everybody else in this world is really messed up." We are apt to say, **"Everybody is messed up" "except me!"**

But, as soon as we say that we have to laugh, because no matter how much we want to believe it, we know it just isn't true. What is true is that we are so messed up ourselves that we need help to see our own messes. That's where the ministry of the Holy Spirit comes in. If we decide to open ourselves to receive the treasures Lent offers, here is one thing we need to do: We each need to pray and invite the Holy Spirit to bring to mind anything that needs to be dealt with so that it will no longer separate us from full obedience to the Lord. From Psalm 139:23-24 we know that David prayed: "Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting."

Ask the Lord to show you anything that is hindering you from being as close to Him as He desires. Perhaps there is a grudge to be forgiven,

3

a disappointment to be expressed and released, an assignment to be fulfilled, a relationship to be mended. Ask the Holy Spirit to pin point the thing you are thinking, feeling, doing, or not doing that is poisoning your relationship with Him. Don't be surprised if the Lord speaks to you very clearly and very quickly; He may give you an answer before you are done asking for it. Or, it may take some time of quiet waiting; but, I believe if you invite Him to speak to you He will, He will bring to mind the next thing you need to do to go deeper with Him.

And then there is a third thing we need to do in order to be free of that which hinders us. We need to ask the Holy Spirit to show us what it is and then we need to receive the answer; the third thing is to obey the Lord regarding the item or items He surfaces. Maybe you need to say you are sorry and ask forgiveness from someone you have offended. Maybe you need to forgive and ask the Lord to bless someone who has offended you. Maybe you need to write that letter you have been thinking about. Maybe you need to make a phone call or pay someone a visit. Maybe you need to join a Bible Study or a Sunday School Class. Maybe you need to volunteer to teach. Maybe you need to obey the Lord with your finances or make a serious effort to put some recurring sin behind you. Whatever the Lord asks you to do or stop doing, whatever He asks you to confess, whatever He asks you to surrender, do it. **Just do it, for obedience to God, will make you glad.**

As we make the commitment to participate in Lent we may expect to experience the love and forgiveness of God more clearly, we may expect to feel surrounded by and upheld by God's family, and we may expect to gain freedom from the spiritual blockages which hinder our walk with the Lord. A fourth thing we may expect to gain is staying power; a greater capacity to persevere on the journey. Hebrews 12:2-4 say, "Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart. In your struggle against sin, you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood."

Here again, as in the promise to be freed from hindrances, the promise of spiritual staying power or what we might call spiritual "grit," comes with instructions. I don't know about you, but I kind of like it when there are specific instructions. It's tough when someone tells you to do something and you have no idea how to go about it. It's tough to troubleshoot a problem with an appliance or with a tool or an

automobile, when you have lost the owner's manual. But, in this case there are instructions. If we desire a faith that will go the distance, spiritual "grit," and staying power we need to pay attention to Jesus. The writer of Hebrews says, "Let us fix our eyes on Jesus." In other words, make spiritual eye contact with Jesus. Think deeply about what He went through in His life. Think about those who questioned His identity and His authority and His integrity. Think about how His closest friends denied Him, betrayed Him, ran away when He needed them most. Whenever you think things in your life are rough and you can't take it any more, and living for God is too costly, just make eye contact with Jesus, look into the eyes of Jesus. **It will give you grit.**

Assurance of God's love and forgiveness, an awareness of our place in God's family, freedom from spiritual hindrances, and grit; these are four of the things we can expect to gain as we take on the Lenten journey. Let me suggest one thing more. Hebrews 12:5-12 say:

And you have forgotten that word of encouragement that addresses you as sons: "My son, do not make light of the Lord's discipline, and do not lose heart when he rebukes you, because the Lord disciplines those he loves, and he punishes everyone he accepts as a son." Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as sons. For what son is not disciplined by his father? If you are not disciplined (and everyone undergoes discipline), then you are illegitimate children and not true sons. Moreover, we have all had human fathers who disciplined us and we respected them for it. How much more should we submit to the Father of our spirits and live! Our fathers disciplined us for a little while as they thought best; but God disciplines us for our good, that we may share in his holiness. No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it. Therefore, strengthen your feeble arms and weak knees.

A fifth thing we may expect to encounter as we participate in Lent is healing pain. That's why some people shy away from the observance of Lent; they want nothing to do with pain. They don't want to feel the guilt and shame which comes to the surface at the probing of the Holy Spirit. They don't want to go through the humiliation of confession or do the hard work of repentance. But, the pain of Lent is good pain.

I know this sounds like a contradiction just as the title of our devotional booklet "Blessings of the Cross," sounds like a contradiction, but it isn't. There are wonderful blessings which flow from the cross, and there are wonderful blessings which flow from the pain of dealing with our sins.

When I was in Ashland, Ohio, for my most recent retreat in the Pastors of Excellence program, we were given an assignment to ask the Holy Spirit to identify a deep wound in our lives that we had failed to fully grieve. Then we were challenged to write a lament, a prayer to God from the gut that would tell Him our true feelings about this wound. I entered into the exercise somewhat skeptically. I wasn't sure I had anything to lament, but then I found myself writing about one of the most painful and embarrassing failures in my life. And, in that prayer of lament I found myself pointing the finger at God and saying "God, why did you let me do that?" "Why didn't You stop me before it was too late?" But, before I finished forming those words, I already heard His answer. What I sensed God saying to me was this: "It's the only way you were ever going to learn that you can't live for Me by your own will power or by what you think is your own native goodness. I had to destroy your proud self-sufficiency so I could use you for my glory. I allowed you to experience that pain because I love you."

If you enter into the true spirit of Lent you will not go far without experiencing some pain, but this is good pain. The pain of Lent is a pain that leads to healing, the healing that leads to joy. I invite you to come with us on the Lenten journey. Come for a deeper assurance of God's love and forgiveness and a greater awareness of your place in God's family. Come to gain greater freedom from spiritual hindrances. Come to increase your staying power, and come to experience the pain that heals. Come along as we seek to receive more fully the blessings of the cross.

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Sermon for February 25, 2007
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Hebrews 12:1-12

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