

The Road Back

Ash Wednesday, 2019. Joel 2:1-2, 12-17. March 6, 2019. The Episcopal Shared Ministry of Our Saviour, Salem and Trinity, Alliance in the Diocese of Ohio. The Rev'd Jerome H. Colegrove.

“Return to me with all your heart... Return to the Lord your God... Who knows whether he will not turn and relent...?”

The prophet Joel makes it clear what the season of Lent, now beginning, is all about: turning back to God. The Christian tradition, like the Jewish tradition from which it springs, insists that God and human beings did not used to be estranged from one another. There was a time of mutual satisfaction, respect and affection between human beings and between human beings and God. At a certain point in history, the distortion of all relationships by selfishness put people at odds with one another and with God, and it now takes work to fix it.

Lent is the time in the Church year when we practice the kind of work it takes to fix the estrangement between one another and God. (We are even estranged within ourselves, so that St. Paul had to make his famous complaint, “The good that I want do I do not do, and the evil that I don’t want to do—that I do!” [Romans 7:19]) Our fasting, self-denial and other practices are called disciplines for two reasons. They require effort; we have to square our shoulders and push into them. And they make us better disciples, that is, better followers of the revelation of healed humanity in Jesus Christ.

Which leads me to the most important point. We don’t do this alone. The subtlest and most pervasive way in which evil undercuts our good intentions and eviscerates our values is the continuous whisper (sometimes a downright shout) that we are all alone, there is no help or hope out there, and we may as well not bother. As I said last Sunday, our Lord Jesus Christ is present to us in the Church, and the Church is an organized engine of grace, which preserves, clarifies and conveys time-tested strategies and techniques for effectively turning to God. (*Repentance* is the traditional word for this Godward turn.)

And beyond the walls of the Church, healing and hope blow on the wind of the Holy Spirit, who swirls in every cranny of creation. When I say (as I often do) that God never tires of trying to get our attention, that’s what I’m talking about. People are drawn to God, and to Christ and his Church, through the action of the Spirit. God is always ahead of us, always at pains to be found, listened to, returned to, and, above all, ready to be a friend, a mentor, a good parent, a creative and cheerful dance partner, whatever we need. Whatever we *really* need, which God, given the chance, will show us ever more clearly. Forever.

So use the resource sheet for practicing Lent; there’s a pile of them in the narthex. Or use whatever works for you. Ask for help. Ask your rector. Go on line. Get together and talk about it. Find your discipline for the road back. God is so much bigger that our baggage of sin and worry and resistance. He’s so much bigger than evil, pain, death and hopelessness. And yet he’s right here. You can turn to him. He’s smiling.