

Ash Wednesday Sermon
The Rev. Megan Dembi

Today is Ash Wednesday, which marks the beginning of the season of Lent. Of all the seasons of the church year, Lent is perhaps the least popular and the most misunderstood. When many Christians hear the word “Lent”, we think of being miserable. We think of 40 days of having to give up things we really like; 40 days of thinking of all of the ways we are terrible people; 40 days of not having any fun. Or maybe We think of a time when we have to give up chocolate or French fries because we know people are going to ask us what we are giving up for Lent, and we don’t want to look bad. But the goal of the season of Lent is not to be miserable and feel terrible and to avoid any kind of enjoyment. It is not to give certain things up so we don’t feel judged by others. The goal of Lent is to be penitent and repentant. This does mean that we have to acknowledge the wrongs we have done and be remorseful of those wrongs we have done, but we’re not supposed to beat ourselves up. After our acknowledgement and remorse of our wrongdoings, Lent gives us the opportunity to turn away from those wrongs, those sins, and begin to live a better life—to turn away from things in our lives that influence us negatively, and instead turn towards God.

In the reading from the prophet Joel, the Lord encourages the people to a Lent-like penitence and repentance. “Return to me with all your heart,” the Lord commands, “with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning; rend your hearts and not your clothing.” Yes, Joel acknowledges that penitence and repentance will probably require at least a little bit of pain. Recognizing and thinking about those bad things we’ve done in our lives is not a pleasant experience. But we’re not meant to wallow in guilt. This is merely the first step of penitence and repentance, an important step, however, because it is only by confronting our wrongdoings that we can turn away from them. But after acknowledging and feeling remorse for our wrongdoings, we are to “Return to the Lord, [our] God.” This step of returning to the Lord is the true purpose of Lent, for without God our lives are “like blackness spread upon the mountains.”

Though we would often rather pretend that we are perfect and that we are completely self-sufficient, the season of Lent forces us to realize our reliance on God, and the importance of our relationship with God. And it gives us a dedicated time period when we can focus on this relationship, which is often easy to neglect. It is easy for us to focus on our need for food—if we don’t we’ll feel hungry. It is easy for us to focus on our need for relationship with others—if we don’t we’ll feel lonely. But it can be very easy for us to forget the importance of prioritizing our need for a strong relationship with God—because unlike hunger and loneliness, we don’t often recognize the symptoms of a broken relationship with God. We may ignore a separation from God because it’s so much easier to focus on other needs in our lives. But Lent reminds us that our spiritual needs HAVE to be a priority in our lives. And Lent confronts us with that reality.

In a few moments, when ashes are placed on our foreheads, we will hear the words-“remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return.” Just as Adam was formed out of the dust of the earth, so was each of us formed and created by God. And just as we were formed and created by God in this life, when this life ends, we will return to our maker in the life to come. Our relationship with God is extraordinarily important, because it is the one relationship that has lasted from before we were born and will continue on after our deaths, into eternity. That is the truth we must embrace during Lent to fully understand the importance of taking this opportunity to deepen our faith and relationship with God. We may think that strengthening our relationship with God is too difficult, but we are not alone in these efforts. Just as we seek out God, God is constantly seeking us—as the shepherd searches for his one lost sheep.

The season of Lent is not for feeling miserable, and it’s not for taking on certain practices or giving certain things up just so we look good in front of other people. The season of Lent is a deeply

personal exploration of what aspects of our lives we need to change for the better in order to draw into closer relationship with God. It is about recognizing the utmost importance of our relationship with God, who has known us before we were born and will continue to know us after we die. So this season of Lent, let us think upon our wrongdoings, our sins. Let us show remorse for those sins, and reflect on how we might amend our lives to turn away from sin. Let us make positive changes in our lives that help us to avoid sin, and instead turn towards God. And let us always remember that our relationship with God reaches beyond our sinfulness, because "God forgives all our sins and heals all our infirmities; God redeems our life from the grave and crowns us with mercy and loving-kindness." Amen.