

Ash Wednesday 2017

Summary: Lent is a time of bright sadness, in which we learn to be mystics by greeting the Lord in our places of desolation, and becoming a person for others.

Lent is the time of bright sadness. It is my favorite season of the Christian year, because that is when the Church teaches us to be mystics by walking us into the wastelands. I warn you: if you choose to obey her entreaties in the weeks ahead, you might not be happy. You certainly will be weird. But more importantly, you'll be a bit more like Jesus, and you'll be a source of life for others.

In the Christian religion, the word "mystical" refers to all the times and places and ways in which the invisible, bodiless God acts upon our visible, concrete existence. Heaven and earth are not far apart, and the God of Jesus Christ is fully invested in the healing and restoration of creation, and you with it.

When we call a person a mystic, we mean that they are particularly attentive to God's work of transformation, and answer the call to be fellow healers. A mystic is first a disciple – an apprentice – in the way of Jesus. We begin that journey by accompanying him to the Cross. For forty days, we engage disciplines of fasting, prayer, and almsgiving. We are in good company: Moses spent forty days with God at Mount Sinai before receiving the tablets of the Law. Jesus spent forty days alone in the Judean wastelands, before taking God's presence to others by teaching, healing, and casting out demons. We mimic their forty days, because we seek a transforming encounter with the very same God. When Jesus stepped into the wastelands, he left behind the help and companionship of the villages. In this place of physical desolation and spiritual emptiness, he made himself vulnerable to bandits, animals, starvation, the elements, and the dark powers in our world that prey upon weakness and fear. In that place of physical risk and existential uncertainty, Jesus sought the will of his Father in prayer. Scripture tells us that this is how he "learned obedience:" he began the path that led to his execution outside of Jerusalem, and endured a death that would give life to the world. Jesus beckons us to follow in this way of desolation and sorrow, all the way to the light of new Creation.

We will attend to the wilderness in our own lives through fasting. Some of us might skip some meals. Some of us might abstain from alcohol, or sugar, or meat. We might fast on some days but not others. (If you want advice, check in with the clergy – the only thing for which I should be responsible is a cat.) Through our practices of fasting and abstinence, we will humble ourselves. We make ourselves more aware of our limitations. We train ourselves to have more self-control. As we do this, the Spirit illumines the desolate, dark corners of our souls, where sin still influences aspects of our lives. This is an act of divine compassion, that calls us to name ourselves as sinners. We start to name our mixed motives and our selfishness, and we live as penitents – people who are purposefully turning away from selfishness and vice, and turning toward God.

"Oh, good," you might say. "A professional God-botherer is telling me that I should feel bad about myself." Well, yes and no. St. Paul wrote that there is a sorrow that works death, and a sorrow that works repentance. I submit that this is the difference between a proper feeling of guilt, and a feeling of shame. The properly formed Christian conscience will experience guilt as

the awareness that she has acted or holds an attitude that is in some way destructive of human flourishing with God. This realization is a gift of faith, a call to repentance. So we turn around and entrust ourselves to the God who loves and forgives sinners. Shame tells a different story altogether. Shame insists that our sins place us outside of God's power and desire to save and to heal. Remember that the Spirit is always drawing us in, folding us into the life of the Trinity. It is the work of the evil one that we would cast ourselves out of it.

Of course, some of us do not require special liturgical reminders of life's horrors. My home parish's motto reads, "the wilderness is on your doorstep." It means that all around us are people lonely and scattered, and that there are wastelands in our own hearts. It means that for many of us, life already seems like one long Lent. We suffer illness. We bury children. We struggle with addiction, depression, and fear. Some of us are in a long recovery from domestic violence, assault, or spiritual abuse. For some of us, our prayers turn to ashes in our own mouths, such that a smear on the forehead will seem simply proper, or ridiculous. For such a sister or brother, the call to greater awareness of mortality and personal sin can feel cruel.

But in this wilderness journey of bright sadness, the Church's practices of prayer, meditation, and worship turn us to the story beyond the Cross. For all of us who must humble ourselves, for all of us who despair of better days, and for all of us who struggle under a weight of shame, this is the good news: Jesus Christ died for our sins and was raised for our justification. He took upon himself our sorry state of rebellion and alienation, and died outside the city walls. On the third day, God raised him to new life. When you were baptized, you were brought into a mystical exchange: you died to sin, and now you await the resurrection of the dead. Even now, that life seeps into our days, and we become a people who live into the freedom of God's forgiveness and healing, and work toward the renewed world. As we pray the Daily Office, meditate upon the Scriptures, study the Faith, make Eucharist together, and share meals, our lives are transformed. We learn to forgive, to hope, and to love in the way of Jesus.

The Church directs us toward almsgiving: we place our presence, our time, our talents, and our goods at the service of others as they struggle through their own desolate places. Mystics are people who are being healed, so they get comfortable in the wilderness. They keep the rest of us from being too alone in places of fear, pain, and bewilderment.

In this liturgy, we name ourselves as sinners. We remember that we're going to die. But here in Christ's Church, it's safe to know that, to name that, and to feel that. It is safe because we are called together as a fellowship on the basis of God's saving love for sinners. Here in the Church, we allow our hearts to be broken. In those empty spaces, we ask for the Lord's help and healing. As he restores us, we go and make ourselves present to others who need help and companionship in their own desolate places. The wilderness is at our doorstep. Let's walk into it together.

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