

ST. JOHN'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH
COMPASS, PA

February 17, 2021 – ASH WEDNESDAY (YR. B)

The Rev. Dr. Nina George-Hacker

Homily: “*Lent: A Time to Get Right with God*”

Joel 2:1-2,12-17 (In a solemn assembly, the people are to return to God with repentance and fasting)
Psalm 103:1-4, 8-14 (The Lord forgives all our sins and heals our diseases; He knows our moral and physical frailty)
2 Corinthians 5:20b-6:10 (Now is the day of salvation!)
St. Matthew 6:1-6,16-21 (Jesus teaches the spiritual disciplines of prayer, fasting, and self-denial)

“There’s nothing wrong with me,” the man said. “But sir,” the EMT pleaded, “you’ve just been in a terrible car accident. You’re bleeding and have some deep bruises. There may be damage to your organs!” The man reiterated: “There’s nothing wrong with me!” “At least have a doctor check you out, sir. We have an ambulance right here—it wouldn’t take very long.” “I told you, there’s *nothing wrong with me!*” “But sir . . .” As the man walked away from the car accident, his wife was there to pick him up and drive him home. Later that night, he died from internal hemorrhaging.

“There’s nothing wrong with me” can be a dangerous thing to say. Spiritually, it’s probably the worst thing a person could possibly say. For anyone to stand before God and say, “There’s nothing wrong with me” is incompatible with what the Scripture teaches us, and is unacceptable to God.

So what is the opposite of “There’s nothing wrong with me”? Wouldn’t it be “There’s everything wrong with me”?

According to the Bible, a Christian is someone who stands before God and says “There’s everything wrong with me.” A Christian is also someone who affirms, “Even so, Jesus Christ has overcome my sin. He has paid the penalty for all the things that are wrong with me.” Reminds me of one of my favorite bumper stickers: “I’m a Christian. Not Perfect. Just forgiven.”

Today is Ash Wednesday, the first day of Lent. What exactly is Lent? This evening, Jesus speaks to us through His Word, and, focusing on four important areas of our spiritual and worldly lives, He tells us both what *to* do, and what *not to* do:

- 1) *Do* “give alms,” meaning donate charitably—but *don’t* make a big show of it, telling all your friends how generous you are, or posting about it on social media.
- 2) *Do* pray—but *don’t* go around bragging about how devout and spiritual you are.
- 3) *Do* fast, meaning, give up a substance or practice—but *don’t* moan and groan to everyone how hard the discipline of self-denial is.
- 4) *Do* store up spiritual treasure in heaven, that is, focus on what your heart truly values that is consistent with God’s will—*don’t* waste your time and energy piling up money and possessions that will just become cheapened, rot, wear out, or get stolen, anyway.

Traditionally, Lent has been a time of self-denial, a time to give up something. But Jesus isn’t as concerned about how much ice cream or crass Netflix series you binge on, as He is about what’s going on in your heart. Lent is a time to try to give up those sins in our lives of which we are all too well aware. Unlike the guy in the car accident, we *know* what’s wrong with us. And like him, if we don’t get the help we need, we, too will die—spiritually.

In the list Jesus gives us in tonight’s Gospel, we see a common denominator in all four admonitions: We are to give up the sins of pride (taking ourselves *way* too seriously) and hypocrisy (appearing to be selfless on the outside while remaining self-centered on the inside).

Lent is a time to give up the sin of duplicity: being a Christian on Sundays, but acting like an unbeliever Monday through Saturday. It's a time to give up the sins of apathy and lethargy, the tendency to feel like: "Someday I'll get my act together with God. Right now, I'm just too busy with other important things."

What is Lent? Lent is the tax collector who stood at the back of the temple, looked down at the ground, and prayed to God, "Lord, have mercy on me, a sinner." It's not like the Pharisee who stood in a prominent place at the temple, boasting before God about how much better he was than everyone else.¹ Jesus concluded that parable in Luke 18 by stating (v. 14): "all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted." It's not that we are to think less of ourselves—but that we are to think of ourselves less.

Lent is a time for us to make a sincere effort to give up our sinful habits and attitudes, our self-serving words and deeds. Like the penitent tax collector, we are to stand before God, asking Him to wash away our sins, to have mercy on us and forgive us, and to give us the grace to turn away from our sinfulness and to begin to live new lives dedicated to, and empowered by, God.

After we lay our sins before Christ, Lent is also a time to give up our guilty feelings, to rejoice in the permanent, unshakeable reality that we have been forgiven. Once we have accepted Christ's forgiveness, there is *nothing* we can do to cause Him to take that back. Our sins have been washed away by the blood of Jesus Christ. *We can* start over. God *allows* U-turns. *We can* aim to be people who obey God, who worship God daily, not only in church, but with the way we live our lives.

Lent is more than just a collection of spiritual practices—almsgiving, fasting, prayer, and making sure our treasure is where our heart is. Lent is also a state of mind, an attitude of honesty, vulnerability, and humility, as we confess our sins before God. And then, Lent is an attitude of relief, peace, and joy, knowing that our sins have been forgiven, that our Lord has wiped our slate clean, as we seek to serve Christ with all that we say, think, and do.

These next 40 days are a time for each of us to look deep into our hearts, and examine the life we've been living, the thoughts we've been having, and the words we have said.

What sin do you want to give up for Lent, and for the rest of your life? Jesus will forgive that sin, because He has already washed it away with His own blood on the Cross. And, if you allow His Holy Spirit to work in your heart, mind, and life, He *will* empower you to live a new life that glorifies God and makes things better for you, too.

If you want to temporarily give up certain things for Lent—say, chocolate, Facebook, smoking, or swearing—as a sign of love for your Savior, that's fine. But what Christ is really concerned about is what's in our hearts, what preoccupies our minds, and what motivates our behaviors.

Tonight, we begin that long walk to the Cross with Jesus, where we will see once more just how serious and terrible our sins are. But there, we will also see how wonderful and deep is our Savior's love is for us. The road doesn't end there but at the empty tomb, where Jesus rises from the dead to prove for all eternity that all of our sins have been forgiven—and forgotten!

May God bless us with His grace to live out a holy Lent. *Amen.*

¹ Adapt. Don Schulz, "What is Lent?" 24 January 2002, [SermonCentral.com](https://www.sermoncentral.com/sermons/what-is-lent-for-ash-wednesday-don-schultz-sermon-on-cross-agony-42857), <<https://www.sermoncentral.com/sermons/what-is-lent-for-ash-wednesday-don-schultz-sermon-on-cross-agony-42857>> 3 February 2021.