

Ash Wednesday | 2/14/18
Rev. Dr. Anne Miner-Pearson
“The Path We’re On”

It is said that you can tell a lot about the story if you read the beginning and the end, the first and last few pages. While I don’t follow that practice since I want the whole story, I think it could be true. Beginnings and endings can speak volumes, or at least hint, about what’s likely to be discovered in the middle. What if we apply this theory to our personal story of Lent? After all, our tradition has given us the two important points: Lent begins on Ash Wednesday and ends on Good Friday. We start the season by feeling black ash on our foreheads, formed by another’s finger into the shape of a cross. In this solemn liturgy, we hear ancient psalms of lament and silently add our own current ones. Weeks later as Lent comes to an end, Holy Week unfolds with stories of betrayal, denial and abandonment. A large wooden cross bears our small votive lights as the recounting of the crucifixion enters our ears and soul again.

So, begins and ends our personal Lenten story each year, but interestingly, the rest of the pages are left blank. Each year the church bids us to observe a “holy Lent” and invites us to write our own story in those 40 days. What will be your story this year? Will it be about food? How you add to your diet - more fish? Or you omit - no chocolate or sugar? Or will your Lenten story focus on time? Do you plan to read devotional books and scripture, intentionally write notes or visit people? Those are familiar examples of Lenten choices, some of mine over the years. Well, I have come to wonder if the beginning and ending of Lent really matches the story of my choices in the middle.

Surely, following Jesus to the new life called resurrection is about more than breaking a fast and savoring a piece of chocolate cake on Easter Sunday. Honestly, as wonderful as it is to eat chocolate again, I don’t feel changed, not changed in the way Jesus’ life and death point to. Surely, Jesus invites us into something deeper and more significant when he calls us to follow him. Isn’t his invitation to “come and see” more about learning to live as full of love, peace, compassion and joy as he did. As fully human, Jesus dwelled among us to guide us on a path to find God and ourselves. Jesus wants to be our map, but not a map to a geographical place or a list of rules or a set of rituals. Jesus offers us the way to change how we think and how we see. Jesus wants to trans-form us from the inside out.

That is Jesus’ path and if we follow him, we will experience his pattern of life. His path is one of letting go and trusting God. His path is one of discovering God in his own depths as the true source of his life, all life. He practiced living from that depth with everyone he met and he managed to keep connected, even in his doubting, even in his death. Over and over again, Jesus let go of the small, petty, ego urges present in all humans - to judge, reject, shame, be angry. So, his path is a deep, inner journey.

For all the gospel references to geographical places - Galilee, Nazareth, Jerusalem -, the radical, central good news of Jesus isn’t about what’s on the outside. Changes on the outside come as Jesus changes us from the inside. Jesus came to dwell among us to teach us an inner spiritual journey. Matthew’s gospel gives us one of Jesus’ description. No trumpets can be heard. No raised hands or dismal faces can be seen. Jesus’ path goes deeper. Jesus’ path is about inner change.

Jesus' path leads us into a holy space in each of us. That space is our true heart and life and can never be taken from us.

Devon offered Thomas Merton words in her sermon on Sunday:

“At the center of our being is a point of nothingness which is untouched by illusion, a point of pure truth, a point or spark which belongs entirely to God, which is never at our disposal, from which God disposes of our life, which is inaccessible to the fantasies of our own mind or the brutalities of our own will. This little point of nothingness and of absolute poverty is the pure glory of God in us.”

Yet, sometimes this “point of pure truth... spark” is a secret to ourselves. We hear the invitation to follow Jesus, but we don't know what that means. Oh, we know how to make changes on the outside, but this inner path may be unknown territory. In fact, you might be wondering if only “holy people” like Jesus and, well, clergy, travel to that “point of nothingness”. Now, really. Think about that for a moment - Jesus issuing an invitation to follow him and it's just for holy people? Isn't that one of the notions he railed against, defied, once overturning temple tables to make his point? No, Jesus wants to show us the way God can change us into who we're created to be - more loving, forgiving, peaceful, content. That's why he's our savior. And he left us a map in plain sight if we have eyes to see and ears to hear, as he was fond of saying. That's what incarnation means. We have him. Jesus is our map and our path.

Wonderfully, some wise people have discovered this inner path long before us and are eager to share what they have learned. One of them is Cynthia Bourgeault, an Episcopal priest and author of *“The Wisdom Jesus”*. In her book, Cynthia offers insights and concrete actions to guide us on our Lenten path. The material from her book will be shared in sermons, worship themes and Adult Forum sessions during Lent. If you are open to this Lenten Path, you will begin to recognize some of the spiritual road signs along the way. Cynthia speaks of four: “an attitude of inner receptivity; a willingness to enter the flow; a commitment to tame those violent animal programs within us; and above all, a passionate desire to unify the heart.” (Page 47)

Don't worry if her words don't make total sense to you. No one is going to ask you to repeat them! Remember this journey isn't about passing a test and making a good grade. This is a path. Every path is travelled one step at a time. Today is only the beginning and, like every good story and life, will unfold little by little. The inner journey can't be rushed, but we have to be willing to “come and see”.

And, as with the first time Jesus spoke those words, those who responded became a community on his path. Although each path is unique, Jesus assures us that he travels with us. Our reminder is the cross. Today it is made of ashes. Yet, we first received that cross on our forehead, marked by oil, sealing us as Christ's own forever in baptism. We are the Body of Christ. So, again from Merton: “Make ready for the Christ, whose smile like lightening, sets free the song of everlasting glory, that now sleeps — in your paper flesh. Jesus, lead us. We want to follow. Amen