

Ash Wednesday

February 14, 2018

Church of the Advent

Rev. Ellen Richardson

Tonight we come together in worship and to mark the beginning of the sacred liturgical season of Lent. It is a quiet and holy season, and historically it carries a somber tone, seen in an austere sanctuary clothed in purple and simplicity. Altar flowers, baptisms and weddings are all put on hold, and lectionary readings shift to stories focusing our attention on the cost of our salvation. We begin with ashes, mindful of the dust from which we were created, and we follow in the dust kicked up by Jesus as he walks with love and determination towards Jerusalem. We follow because we know already that through the road of suffering we know is ahead, we will find resurrection, and



redemption.

Every year I hear people saying that Lent seems *early* this year; it seems to catch us unawares—like deadlines for those important tasks that we have nevertheless put on the back burner—waiting for time and space enough to give them our best

attention. In that sense, Lent always comes too early, and I am never quite ready to stop and re-learn its gifts and its lessons—repentance, reconciliation and right relationship, redemption of old guilt, old habits, old resentments and old pain. I am never quite ready to accept the Lenten invitation to slow down, to breathe more deeply, to listen more intently, and to begin to clean out my spiritual closets, where everything I would prefer not to look at has been thrown.

In another sense, the season of Lent always comes around the corner at *exactly* the right time, though any deep significance for Ash Wednesday landing on American Valentine's Day this year is beyond my theological expertise and willingness to speculate. What I can relate to each year at the beginning of Lent is that the bulbs resting deep in the hard, cold ground have been waiting patiently for the promise of the spring, calling them up out of the dirt with new green shoots. The warming sun, is

coming in due season—bidden or unbidden. New growth is coming, whether, or not we have gotten around to pruning or cleaning out the flowerbeds; the trees outside my office window are already offering a show of tiny pink blossoms.

Those deep places where we have been sheltering our hardness of heart have also been waiting for some warmth and light—coming in the form of the 40 days of Lent—bidden or unbidden—calling us to repentance, to forgiveness, and to reconciliation.

I sometimes imagine Lent as the name of a disheveled traveler with a bad attitude who shows up on the back doorstep once a year with claims that we are supposed to spend six weeks feeling bad about ourselves. It's OK to invite him in and hear him out, while still remembering that Lent *is not* a season for groveling in our guilt, nor one that calls for a knee-jerk, lock-step scramble to give up a special treat or take on yet another task in an already too-fully scheduled life, so that we can put another check in another box, or bask in our suffering. Better to offer the unwelcome guest a place to rest and listening ear, maybe even offer him some chocolate. It could lead to a change of heart—about Lent and about ourselves.

Lent *is* a time that calls us to wake up to those things we have done, and things we have left undone, which have kept us from being all God has called us to be; sometimes those are small things and sometimes those are big things. It is a season set aside for working in our own dirt, turning it over, feeding it with living water, and being open to planting something new. Lent is a season for taking stock of our relationships with God and others, opening ourselves to new ideas, new conversations, and new ways of being God's people together.

Our Wednesday night Lenten Series this year is meant to make space for this work. We live in a world that troubles us—in many different and sometimes differing ways. Our culture is so overwhelmed with divisiveness that we are at risk for losing our capacity to listen to one another, or to speak without causing pain. We are in danger of this way of being becoming second nature—a new normal—where we no longer *recognize* our neighbor whom we are to love as ourselves. So, in a brave attempt at *metanoia*—a turning around—we will come together for some conversations on

Wednesday nights during Lent to talk about what it might look like to seek a change of heart. Beginning next Wednesday at 6pm we begin with a quiet Rite I Eucharist, followed by a simple meal and exploration of what it means to have the heart of a Christian, and how that journey might lead us through the darkness that surrounds us, into the light of spring, of grace, and of resurrection.

In just a few moments we will be invited to enter the threshold of a holy Lent by coming forward to claim our mortality—wearing a symbol of the dust from which we came, and the dust to which we will someday return. As we take our first fearless steps in this Lenten journey together— fully and gratefully alive—may we be awake to its message, be open to its opportunities to stretch and grow, and be receptive of its blessings. AMEN