

Ash Wednesday and Imposition of Ashes
Saint Dunstan's Episcopal Church
2 March 2022

Joel 2:1-2; 12-17

We have had some bad weather around here these last couple of weeks. We actually had snow in parts of Texas, a truly rare occurrence in this part of the world. Of course, for us the snow was such a novelty that many of us spent the day playing outside, sledding, and building snow men. Of course, for us the cold weather is just an annoyance, in other parts of the world, extremely cold weather could be life threatening and immobilizing. One of my most vivid memories of cold temperatures in Iowa was the sheer amount of clothes that we had to wear just to be comfortable outside.

- Long Underwear and Long Sleeve shirts were used for undergarments
- Over them we would wear heavy pants, long sleeve shirts, and heavy cotton socks, creating a second layer of clothing.
- After this we would put on a third layer by wearing a heavy sweater, and snow boots.
- A fourth Layer often would come in the form of a heavy coat, gloves, hat and earmuffs.
- For children it was actually encouraged that full body ski suits be used.

Even after all these precautions it was often encouraged that people stayed indoors and limit exposure to the frigid elements as much as possible, especially for children and the elderly. The temperatures got so cold that even your tears would freeze on contact, and you could get frost bitten just by being out for a few minutes. I was always fascinated by the routine of shedding clothes that happened every time the kids came back in after some time outside. Layer by layer they would shed the extra weight until they felt free of the burden of these wet, semi-frozen clothes.

In many ways Lent is like this process of dressing down. As we go through life, we put on extra weight that slows down our walk of faith and our relationship with the Lord. Some of these layers provide us protection, but they slow us down, nonetheless. Let me give you a few examples of this: We get hurt by someone we love and, from that moment on, we make the decision not to trust anyone again. Yes, this decision will protect us from experiencing pain, but it also causes us to become isolated from others and perhaps even from God. Someone of a different race or ethnic background offends us or fails to live up to our expectations, and from then on, we purposely act cautiously with other members of that ethnic or racial group, or bad-mouth all because of the sins of one. Yes, perhaps this decision will insulate us from being taken advantage of, or offended, or it makes us feel superior to that group, etc. But eventually this protective layer develops into hatred, racism, and intolerance. We have been financially exploited by a bank, credit card company, or person, and now we decide to do likewise to others before they have a chance to do it to us. This decision could protect us from abuse, but it also becomes unfair treatment of our brothers and sisters.

Sin can protect our ego, build walls of separation to keep others out, build a wedge between ourselves and God and others, and eventually it has the potential to make us much less than what God intended us to be. Our lives become entangled by resentment and hatred, by a misguided view of what's important, by a utilitarian treatment of others, and by a constant move away from God and our brothers and sisters. These layers can be protective at first, but eventually this extra weight becomes much too heavy a burden for us to carry. The time comes when we are so overwhelmed with the extra guilt, anxiety, resentment, isolation, and bitterness that we can barely tolerate the company of others, and we feel absolutely abandoned by God.

Lent invites us to pare down, to ask God and each other for forgiveness, to place all of our burdens at the feet of the cross of Jesus and to get rid of all those layers of clothing that no longer protect us, but rather enslave us and limit our movements. But Lent also reminds us that we are not alone in this journey of self-assessment and in this task of getting rid of these extra layers. God's Holy Spirit accompanies us in our desert experience as it accompanied Jesus during his 40 days of self-assessment, meditation and testing. In fact, without the Holy Spirit none of us would have the ability to change anything in our lives.

The prophet Joel today reminds us, "Yet even now, says the LORD, return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning. Rend your hearts and not your clothing. Return to the LORD, your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and relents from punishing." God knows the heavy burdens that weigh us down, and he longs to lift them from our shoulders and from our hearts. Our God accepts U-turns, and Lent provides us the opportunity to assess the direction of our life and to begin the process of turning around and heading in the direction God desires for us.

Today we are reminded that we are finite, we are made out of dust and to dust we will return. Life is too short to be isolated from God and from each other. May this Lent help you to assess your life, to choose to shed what's unnecessary from it, and to prepare yourself in mind and spirit to celebrate the great mysteries of our salvation during Holy Week. To love is to seek reconciliation and forgiveness.

May the Lord help you accomplish this in all your relationships. May God Bless you! Amen