

eyes to see ears to hear

LENTEN DEVOTIONS



FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
102 Ann Street
Fayetteville, N.C.
www.firstprez.com

introduction

*The heavens declare the glory of God;
the skies proclaim the work of his hands.
Day after day they pour forth speech;
night after night they reveal knowledge. (Psalm 19:1-2)*

God is not silent. Creation shouts God's glory and announces God's wisdom, but speaks into a world in which spiritual eyes are often blind and spiritual ears are often deaf. Lent is a time to repent of our blindness and deafness. It is an opportunity to turn from our numbness and distraction so we can see once again the glory of God shining in the face of Jesus Christ.

These scripture readings and meditations are offered as a way to help us see again, and hear again, God's Word of life so we may turn and be healed. May they be a blessing to you during these weeks of preparation for the good news of Easter!

Dr. Mike Garrett

up from the ashes

READ JOEL 2:1-2, 12-17

Life is a story of dust and ashes...twice.

We read in the book of Genesis:

Then the Lord God formed a man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being. (2:7)

Up from the ashes. The glory of life is the gift of God. Beautiful sunlit days, falling in love, heady accomplishments, the longing for life, purpose and meaning...none of it comes naturally for dust. All these things are breathed in by the One who created us to love life and its Creator.

We forget. It's easy to believe when we are healthy and prosperous that all these wonders are gifts we give ourselves. But our glory, apart from God, has a way of becoming ashes. The job becomes hard and unfulfilling. The marriage breaks your heart. We discover in the secret places of the soul that we are a mix of light and shadow, good and bad. We rise up in the morning, the thrill is gone, and we don't know where to find it.

The Christian faith says that the path back to glory passes through the ashes, again. This time they are the ashes of repentance:

"Even now," declares the Lord, "return to me with all your heart, with fasting and weeping and mourning." (Joel 2:12)

On Ash Wednesday we mark ourselves with ashes to remind us that apart from God we are dust, and have no room for the glory of God in our lives. We can't rise up from the ashes until we are willing to admit that apart from God's love, mercy and forgiveness, ashes are all we will ever have.

The good news of the Christian gospel reminds us that Jesus Christ, God's Son, came into the world to make our rising again possible. Jesus did not come to improve us. He came so that the power of God could re-create us. Through faith in Christ's death for our sin, the Spirit of Christ's risen life blows the breath of new life into the ashes of our repentance. We can turn away from the dust of an unbelieving life and once again be thrilled by the glory of God.

Up from the ashes. On Ash Wednesday we remember we are dust. It's the first step on the way to making room for Easter glory.

forty

READ MATTHEW 4:1-11

Jesus was led by the Spirit into the desert to be tempted by the devil. After fasting forty days and forty nights, he was hungry.” (Matthew 4:1-2)

Why forty?

The Bible likes the number 40. Moses, after leading Israel’s escape from Egypt, went up on Mt. Sinai and fasted for 40 days and 40 nights while he received the commandments of God. The people of Israel wandered in the desert for 40 years because of their lack of trust in the faithfulness of God. And Jesus, at the beginning of his public ministry, spent 40 days and 40 nights in the desert, fasting alone and enduring the creative temptations of the devil.

On the more practical side, coaches, personal trainers and psychologists will often tell you it takes between 30 and 40 days of effort to make a new habit stick in your life. Personal transformation and personal endurance seem to go together.

Behind the season of Lent is the picture of Jesus, both fasting and faithful, while the devil tempts him to turn his back on trusting God. One day of faithfulness on Jesus’ part for every year of faithlessness on Israel’s. Jesus’ faithfulness to God was for both Israel and us. It was part of his unique, unrepeatable work as the Son of God for our forgiveness and redemption.

But the pattern of his faithfulness is repeatable. Lent is the invitation to embrace the discipline of faithfulness in our own lives. Forty days to turn toward God in a fresh and focused way as the Christian habit becomes more and more our second nature.

How will you turn? What fresh expression of faithfulness is right for you, right now? Is it fasting from the self-promotion of social media? Is it taking time to be quiet in God’s presence? Is it taking up a new way of praying or reading the Bible?

There’s more than one right answer. Take the time to choose yours. Lent is an opportunity to put Jesus’ words into practice: *Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only.*

birth

READ JOHN 3:1-17

*Jesus replied, "Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again."
(John 3:3)*

None of us had anything to say about being born. We can't even remember it. Other people can tell us the story of our birth, but that only makes the miracle of being here all the more amazing. Our lives are the result of someone else's choices.

We are often so busy trying to make something of ourselves we forget that humbling reality. It's hard enough to grasp as a biological truth, so we can understand the confusion of Nicodemus when Jesus offers it as a spiritual one. Jesus tells him that God is not an achievement or the reward for a life well lived. God is out of your hands. You won't even understand what God is up to in this world unless you are born again.

So Nicodemus, the teacher of religion, scratches his head and asks, "How can someone be born when they are old?" *"Surely, they cannot enter a second time into their mother's womb to be born!"* (John 3:4) I don't get it. I've spent my life making God my pursuit only to be told that God comes to me as a gift or not at all.

Lent is a good time to ponder the humility of our birth, both physical and spiritual. God is not an achievement. Salvation is not a reward. The good news of the gospel is not that we made something of ourselves but that God made something of us. God called us. God gave us new life. God opened our infant eyes to a new way of life. And God gives us the enduring gift of eternal life.

Just as we had nothing to say about being born the first time, it appears we have little to say about it the second time, too. God gave us new birth even before we knew enough to seek it. Let's sit with that reality this week. When the space given over in our lives to pride grows smaller, our capacity to worship God grows larger.

jars

READ JOHN 4:5-42

She brought her jar to the well to draw water. It was common, inconvenient, and absolutely necessary. Few things could be more common than drawing water from a well in a Middle Eastern village. Doing it at high noon on a hot day by yourself was no fun. Having clean water for your daily needs was essential.

We spend a lot of time doing things that are common, inconvenient, and essential. We all have our own version of that woman's empty water jar. Think of it as the day's necessary labor. We do it dutifully and with low expectations of anything remarkable happening when we do.

Jesus meets this woman in the midst of her daily labor and low expectations. She doesn't make it easy for him. He is an irritation. He is an obstacle her routine, a promiser of grand things from God in her tiring world.

Lent is a season in the church year where we are asked to look more carefully for the presence of God in the midst of our daily labor and low expectations. God is at the well, but are we open to finding God as we come with our empty jars to do the common, inconvenient, and absolutely necessary?

Fortunately, Jesus is persistent. He prods her imagination – and makes embarrassing points about her personal life – until she realizes this is no ordinary trip to the well. No, something is happening here. This is no ordinary man, and this will be no ordinary day. Gradually, ever so gradually, the lights come on. Then she leaves her water jar on the ground, goes back to her ordinary village, and says, *“Come, see a man who told me everything I ever did. Could this be the Christ?”*

God desires to fill the empty jar of our ordinary life with the living water of God's grace, mercy, and forgiveness. But, we can say it better. Just as God did for that ancient woman, God desires not so much to fill our jar as to make us one, so we can pour out God's living water as we go about the common, inconvenient, and absolutely necessary business of life.

Will we allow Jesus to meet us at the well of our ordinary lives? Will we, like her, share our honest, uncontrived surprise at a God who knows our thirst better than we do, and gives us living water until it overflows? Good questions to ask, and answer, this week.

mud

READ JOHN 9:1-41

"There are none so blind as those who will not see."
- John Heywood, 1546

"Go wash in the pool of Siloam," Jesus tells the man. Now the miracle.

"The man went and washed, and came home seeing." The word "Siloam" means "sent."

A person who listens to Jesus, goes where Jesus tells him to go and does what Jesus tells him to do, sees.

This seems so simple, but it's not. The next thirty-four verses of chapter nine mainly describe those who cannot listen to Jesus, go where he goes or do what he does. They are those who already claim to see – the powerful and the religious. When it comes to the simple instructions of Jesus, they believe there is nothing to see. They spend their time trying to convince a blind man that Jesus couldn't possibly have helped him see. In the process, they become blinder to the truth about themselves and God.

That's the scary thing about this story. Both sight and blindness appear to be crippling spiritual conditions. Those who insist that they see, over time, wind up seeing much less. Those who know they are blind, over time, wind up seeing much more. What's the difference? There are those who are willing to be "sent" by Jesus, and those who are not.

Where is Jesus sending you right now? Are you willing to go? God may be challenging you to think a new thought, turn away from an old behavior, repent of a faulty point of view, or be compassionate toward someone we never thought needed (or perhaps deserved) our care and concern.

Those who are sent, see. Those who refuse, lose what little sight they have. It's simply, painfully, and wonderfully true. Let's not make it harder than it is.

Prayer thought:

God who opens blind eyes, open mine today. Amen.