

Ash Wednesday
March 6, 2019
The Rev. Buddy Stallings

Many of you know what life has been like for me over the last couple of weeks. Several asked if I would still preach in light of Molitor's so very recent death. The truth is that, at least in part, I am preaching because of him. Because he loved Calvary so very much, because he loved me in this pulpit so much, he would want me to do it and would probably chastise me if I didn't. Increasingly convinced of how thin the space is between here and there, I decided not to risk his ire even from another shore. Molitor was embarrassingly (to me) proud of me. And he never allowed himself to be shackled one second by the confinement of truth in expressing how proud he was. Across the floor at a gathering, I would hear him tell people that I was the Rector of the largest church in the country. That is patently untrue; and, yet, it was his story no matter how oft corrected, and he never abandoned it. I interpret that as affection, not some intrinsic untruthfulness. So it is with his spirit at my back and with the comfort of a community of faith, which has become my own—one of his last and great gifts to me—this place—that I am here tonight.

This year being no exception and no doubt even more poignantly fraught for me, I always approach Lent with some hesitation, if not outright, trepidation. At least since the 4th Century, and to some less embellished degree as early the 2nd Century in the life of Irenaeus, one of the early church fathers, the church has recognized the need of a time of reflection and penitence as it approaches the celebration of the Paschal Mystery. Modeling the days upon Jesus' time in the wilderness, it was the best of intention. And, yet, it is a season that is almost inherently rife with the possibility of well-intended but often sadly unsatisfying piety: darkness becoming more motif than pathway to the dazzling light that we know as the love of God. Back to Molitor one more time: at some point every year, he would say, "You people take this Lent stuff a little too seriously for my taste." *You people*—as though he were other. A side note, Waffle Shop at Calvary, I must say, mitigated for him (and for me as well) the heaviness of the season. Or perhaps I should say it brought a different kind of heaviness: a little fish pudding, a dollop of homemade mayonnaise mixed with touch of penitence, followed by a strawberry Schaum torte—goes down easy every time.

But in all seriousness, something about this day, Ash Wednesday, speaks profoundly of and to our souls. What is it? I am not sure, but I saw it, whatever it is, in macro manifestation during my years at St. Bart's. From 7 am to 7 pm on rotating shifts, we priests stood at the crossing of the church to administer ashes, saying often as many as 2000 times, "Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return." It is one of the most overtly religious days in the City. Thousands came, year after year, seeking, searching, hoping, repenting. Because I love the early morning, I often took the first shift; and at 7 sharp they began the trek down the long center aisle. A good number even at that hour were very chic looking as though they were ready for a magazine shoot; more though with hard hats, ready I imagined to engage all sorts of dangerous tasks; one dowager came straight from central casting, leading a black standard poodle upon whose majestic and coifed head—the poodle's—I wouldn't have dared put anything as mortal as

ashes—who happily simply watched without much interest as I reminded his owner of her mortality; a few wore ear phones still in, presumably silenced but who can say for sure; more than a few trudged forward, sadly bent and laden with bags, metaphorical and otherwise; some smiling came as though I was pronouncing “have a nice day,” rather than the assurance of their eventual return to dust.

All of them—like us I believe—coming, bringing what each has in search of God, coming to admit and to be reminded that in the end there is nothing between us and God: we return to that from which we have come, both places—creation and eternity—profoundly inhabited by God. And if they/we only know it with such vivid imagery on one day, Ash Wednesday, then so be it, better one than none. Life is the process—simple and magnificent—between our beginning and our ending when we search for God. Lent with its purple hues reminds us of that journey, calling us at its deepest level to remember our thirst for God: “as a deer longs for flowing streams, so my soul longs for you, O God,” cried the psalmist; and there is nothing more true or profound about each of us than that fact: we thirst for God when we recognize the thirst for what it is and when we imagine it as a longing for something else.

Is Lent inherently sad and ponderous? Well, yes, sometimes it is but not with silly or pretend solemnity—remember Matthew’s counsel that our deepest piety is always private—even as we smear highly visible ashes on our foreheads. But for sure, however publically or privately we must be, an honest experience of Lent almost always contains the rough and tumble of examining our lives. Such honesty brings us to our knees. So is it then indeed a season about guilt? It will certainly sound like it in a few moments when we confess our pride, hypocrisy, impatience, self-indulgent appetites and ways, intemperate love of worldly goods, negligence in worship, our prejudice, waste and pollution. And that is just part of the list. So in a way, yes, it is about guilt, regret. That is part of it. But that is primarily the part that is more about us than it is about God. Listen to me: in my heart of hearts I know this to be true. No matter how firmly entrenched in our consciousness as a church and a culture, it is not true that God takes names and keeps lists. God’s calls us to repent, not in order to make us more lovable to God—that is the nature of God: God *loves* us. God calls us fervently to repentance so that we can more fully, joyfully, and faithfully live as God’s very own people. While God no doubt loves a contrite heart, it is not for the sake of contrition. God uses contrition as a brief passageway to amendment of life, so that the substitute for joy that often has been our habitat may be replaced with the genuine peace and joy in which God truly desires us to reside.

If Lent can be observed with honest assessment of our lives but within the reflection of what we know and hope to be true about God’s grace, *then* we can have a truly holy Lent. The solemnity of our music, our lack of flowers, and our pensive collects during Lent are designed to slow us down, to give us space and less clutter for thinking and feeling, for loving and being loved, for praying with hope and acceptance, and, yes, for crying out in pain and loss and regret. But at its core, there is nothing grim about that for the entire season is an occasion of hope. The Anglo Saxon word for “lent” means spring, a time of growth and renewal, of promise and goodness, of nurture. Be pensive, be thoughtful, pray till you drop; just don’t be miserable. The God we seek to know is a God of mercy, not of misery.

In the name of God: AMEN.