

Ash Wednesday, 2019 Theme:—Shadowlands

I hope you all enjoyed yesterday. The Tuesday before Ash Wednesday goes by several names. Some call it Mardi Gras, some call it Fat Tuesday, some call it Shrove Tuesday. In years past, when the Church shaped the popular culture more thoroughly, Fat Tuesday was big. The point of Fat Tuesday is just what it sounds like---it's the last day before the austerity of Lent takes center stage, and so Christians were urged to empty out their store of eggs and dairy products and fatty meat and splurge on it all for one last day before the season of fasting, simplicity, solemnity, and charity began. I did it up, taking my mentee from the Mentor Duluth program out for a dinner at Lil Angie's that consisted of chips and salsa, followed by Mexican Fried ice cream. Pancakes are a traditional Fat Tuesday food, as well. But all that's behind us now. We're in Lent.

Lent is distinctively a season within the church year that is out of step with our usual culture and our typical human preferences. Fat Tuesday may be more to our liking than a season of fasting, simplicity, solemnity and charity. We might prefer to skip right from Fat Tuesday directly to the bright joy and abundance of Easter, but that's not how it works. The season of Lent intervenes, and Lent is the season and the journey we are beginning this evening—regardless of how easily we embrace it!

The fact is, though, the Lent offers us some unique opportunities for which we don't often otherwise find encouragement. For example, there is an emphasis on Lent to spend time in prayer and Scripture; even our small congregation adds two possible ways to explore that during this season, with Randi's spiritual practices group on Tuesday evenings, or Lyle's 3 part Bible Study. Of course, one could also always take home a

Christ in our Home devotion booklet and try using it, just during Lent, as an experiment, if nothing else.

Lent is also a time to consider some particular self-discipline or sacrificial giving of some kind or other. Our culture preaches endlessly at us to take up self-indulgence. So, I'm grateful that the Church encourages me to practice discipline, sacrifice, and simplicity instead. In the invitation to Lent, we shortly will hear that call to consider an additional emphasis on spiritual disciplines like prayer, fasting, and acts of charity. This could be a time to experiment, if nothing else, with simplifying or cutting back on our typical food intake, perhaps, to try to fast from meat one day a week or from second helpings every day of the week. It can be a time to simplify and declutter homes and closets. Pledge to give away one item per day to a charity that may use it, so that by the end of Lent, you've donated 40 articles of clothing or household use. It's a time to remember those in need. Take your daily Starbucks money and put it into the Churches' Love box for the hungry instead. Find the value and inspiration that comes from embracing a discipline or practice that you may not usually do. Lent is the ideal opportunity to try something out of the ordinary. Lent gives us permission to experiment.

The other wonderful thing about Lent is its honesty. Lent offers us an opportunity to openly and honestly be the messed-up, lost people we sometimes are. And for anyone who finds themselves caught up in situations that involve sin, suffering, or death, this *evening* and this *season* are the times that genuinely reflect their reality and the reality of our world. Because life isn't all sunshine; sometimes it's much more dominated by shadows.

This evening I would like to briefly explore, as an image for the Lenten season, the reality of shadows. Maybe you know that the word, Lent, is a shortening of the word “lengthen.” Lent comes at a time in the natural cycle of the earth’s seasons, when daylight is lengthening. In other words, spring time. And as daylight lengthens and the angle of the sun changes, so also do the shadows cast by people and things lengthen, too. In fact, along with noticing a definite increase in sunshine each day now, I have been admiring the existence of shadows—something not seen as much during the frequently gray skies of winter time. Lent is about life lived in the shadows—shadows of sin, of death, of suffering, of sorrow. Maybe some of you remember the movie from 1993, “Shadowlands,” about English theologian and writer C.S. Lewis and his wife’s terminal struggle with cancer. The title for the movie was apt---he and his wife were in the Shadowlands. Sometimes that’s where we find ourselves, also. In the shadowlands.

The writers of Scripture were well-acquainted with life’s Shadowlands. I spent some time with a Bible concordance, and I was surprised by how many references there are to *shadows* in the Bible. There’s the familiar 23rd Psalm of course—“Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death”. Death is a significant shadow, maybe the significant shadow, of our lives. We face our mortality during Lent, particularly this very evening at our Ash Wednesday service, as ashes are placed on our foreheads and we hear the words that pronounce our death sentence: “Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.” Death is a reality that we all must face, both the death of those we love and our own deaths. Just this past weeks, we have experienced the death of 2 who were significant to many of us: Roy Mattson and David Jackson. Death is a reality in our

lives, and almost always, death causes us intense grief. There *are* seasons of grieving in our lives that can't be covered up with a pretense of good cheer. When we grieve, we're living out Lent, living in the *shadow* of death and sadness, and all of us go there sometimes, whether we want to or not.

I found a number of other shadows in Scripture. In Psalm 39, we hear the psalmist lamenting some profound difficulties that have overtaken him. He says, "I held my peace to no avail; my distress grew worse....surely everyone stands as a mere breath. Surely everyone goes about like a shadow. Surely for nothing they are in turmoil; they heap up and do not know who will gather...I am worn down by the blows." The transitory nature of life has worn down the writer. He seems to have that sense we all sometimes get of life being one heavy blow after another to absorb. He's weary of heart, tired of the shadows under which he lives, longing for sunshine, but not there yet.

As I said, Lent begins with the acknowledgement of our sin and mortality on this evening of Ash Wednesday. So, in a sense, we enter that realm of shadow tonight. Lent is a journey for Christ and us that inevitably leads to the cross of Good Friday. And yet the cross casts a shadow, too.

Shortly we'll sing the hymn, "Beneath the Cross of Jesus". I had never noticed the shadows in this hymn before. It was written by a Scottish church worker, Elizabeth Clephane. It begins, "Beneath the cross of Jesus, I long to take my stand; The shadow of a mighty rock within a weary land." And verse three begins- "I take, O cross, your shadow for my abiding place; I ask no other sunshine than the sunshine of his face."

Shadows are not only cast by sin, brokenness, and suffering. They are cast by God as

well. Shadows of protection, of redemption. In a hot, desert climate like the Holy Land, we can appreciate that shadows can be a good thing at times, a welcome and cooling relief. In the same book of Psalms in which we encountered those deep shadows of despair, there are also a number of references to another kind of shadow. In Psalm 17, the writer prays, “Guard me as the apple of your eye; hide me in the shadow of your wings.” The familiar Psalm 91, set to music in the song “Eagle’s Wings” includes the words, “You who live in the shelter of the Most High, who abide in the shadow of the Almighty.” So there *are other* shadows---shadows cast by God. The shadow of God’s wings, an image of being sheltered, comforted, lifted up. The shadow of the cross. That is the shadow that, in the surprise ending to all of our stories, will overcome all the other shadows that darken our lives.

It may well be that Ash Wednesday and Lent are the shadowlands of the Church year. And we might like sunnier times better. But these shadows are not without honesty and value. Maybe we need to explore them and acknowledge them. We may not like the shadows nearly as well as we like the light, but holy things can happen for us in the Shadowlands of our lives. Lent is an opportunity to honestly acknowledge the shadows of sorrow, sin and death. It’s also an opportunity to discover that God’s wings and God’s cross cast shadows, too, shadows that offer protection and salvation.

Shortly, we will be marked with the cross of Christ in ashes. The cross of Ash Wednesday is the cross of mortality. But it is the same cross that is made on your forehead at the time of your baptism and the cross made over your casket at the time of your death. And *those* are crosses of salvation, redemption, and hope. Tonight we begin

the season where we journey with Christ to the cross of Good Friday. The *empty cross* of the Risen Christ of Easter Sunday lies yet ahead. That cross *also* casts a shadow, and that is a shadow we are thankful to be within as we live and die and rise again . Amen.