

Forty Days, Forty Nights

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Trinity Church in the City of Boston

Ash Wednesday

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Well, here we are at Ash Wednesday and the beginning of Lent. In Lent our worshipping community takes a journey together. It is a journey of renewal in preparation for our celebration of Easter. The next forty days and forty nights present us with opportunities and possibilities. I'll speak more about them in a minute. We are being led out into the wilderness of Lent so that we might find and be found by God in the ways in which we need to find and be found by God.

Think of Jesus going into the wilderness for forty days and forty nights. Think of Moses on the mountaintop for forty days and forty nights. Think of Elijah ... forty days and forty nights. Now think of the forty days and forty nights that stretch before us. They can be for us a time of renewal in the faith, a time of preparation for what is to come, a time of deepening communion with our God.

Ash Wednesday is the bridge we now cross, the thresh-hold we step over into the wilderness, into Lent, forty days and forty nights. If the word "wilderness" disconcerts you, try remembering that, Biblically speaking, wilderness is where God works to shape and form a people for God.

Lent provides you and me with forty opportunities, each new morning, to be shaped and formed by God for God. Lent provides us with opportunities to acknowledge our need for that to happen; opportunities to acknowledge the ways in which we have become mis-shapen and mal-formed, even dis-abled; opportunities to be open to be shown those things about ourselves that we hide from ourselves.

One meaning of the word "Satan" is "hinderer," "hinderer" – Lent provides us with opportunities to acknowledge the hinderers that beset us. In a short time we will participate together in the Litany of penitence, and we will name those hinderers, confess

them and offer them up to God. We will name our self-indulgent appetites, our envy of others, our love of things, our dishonesty among a long list of other hinderers. And we will ask the God who is ever faithful to us to forgive our unfaith. We will ask God to heal and empower and renew so that we may turn away from the hinderers and turn back to God.

You Flannery O'Connor readers here tonight may recall the story "Revelation." In it a Mrs. Turpin wends her way through life bowed down by unrecognized hinderers – complacent, self-satisfied, racist, judgmental, she journeys on. And then – one evening at sundown Mrs. Turpin is granted a vision: she sees a vast swinging bridge extending upward from the earth and upon it a vast horde of souls rumbling toward heaven. And all of them are the kind of folk she has disdained. People Mrs. Turpin would describe as freaks and lunatics are shouting and laughing and clapping their hands as they mount up on the bridge. And behind them are people she is pleased to recognize, people like her. But she is shocked to realize that "even their virtues are being burned away." Even those qualities we consider our virtues, you see, can mask our need to ask forgiveness, our ability to receive it and our desire to be forgiven, made whole, made new.

Yet, here we all are this Ash Wednesday night, with the opportunity to let God unmask us and lead us to Easter.

Time is of the essence, though. Whether we live twenty years or eighty years, there is only so much time. Dust we are and to dust we shall return.

So every year we are given this time, this span of forty days and forty nights in which to take up the opportunities God offers. Opportunities to recognize and begin to fast from the hinderers that weigh us down and lure us from our true meaning and purpose. Opportunities to renew our praying, our working and our worshipping so that we might love and serve the Lord truly and faithfully. Opportunities to prepare to celebrate resurrection in joy and in wonder and in thankful praise. Amen.