

Ash Wednesday
February 10, 2016 at 7:30 pm
The Rev. Robert H. Malm

Intensity

The season of Lent began as a time to prepare for Easter, for the possibility of new life, resurrection, living into the glory of Christ risen from the dead. The early Church used several weeks before Easter to prepare adult converts for Holy Baptism. These newcomers to the faith were filled with excitement, with joy, with hope to join the Body of Christ and share in the Eucharist.

Over time, as there were fewer adult converts and more babies being baptized, year round and often in private family-only gatherings with a priest, the emphasis of Lent changed from preparing for Christ's risen glory to living into his trials and sufferings of the Passion. Acts of self-denial, sometimes to the extreme, abstinence, fasting, penitence all became a part of the tradition of Lent.

So in Lent we are asked to maintain a balance between knowing Christ's Passion and knowing his Glory, a balance between discipline and abstinence and joy, excitement and hope. I think we see this balance in the two proper prefaces for Lent. Lent is the only season in the Church year with two proper prefaces (see *Book of Common Prayer*, p. 346).

The one we use tonight and for the first half of Lent mentions: Jesus' temptations, sin, evil, Christ who died for us. Starting on the Fourth Sunday in Lent, the Sunday called Refreshment Sunday because we have made it past the half-way mark, we begin using the second preface, encouraging us to "prepare with joy for the Paschal Feast...renewed..." full of grace and love.

Lent has a certain intensity. This intensity begins tonight as we consider an important part of Christ's most intense teaching – The Sermon on the Mount. "*Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them...*" "*Do not be like the hypocrites...*"

Intensity is defined as a great concentration of energy, power, focus, force. We experience this intensity with Jesus in the Wilderness, tempted by Satan...this intensity builds through the Transfiguration to the last week in Jerusalem. The Three Sacred Days, Maundy Thursday, Good Friday and Easter Eve, concentrate us on the entire power of God's love in Christ. The Passion and the Glory are an intense experience of God in Christ.

The word "intense" comes from an ancient Latin word meaning "to stretch tight." Jesus' Passion and Glory is God's stretching of humanity, God's eternal energy all focused in Jesus' death and resurrection. This brings the defeat of sin and evil and death. This is the gift of new and everlasting life – the gift of freedom forever.

The three traditional practices of Lent help us to be "stretched" ourselves. They help us to move beyond ourselves to concentrate on God – God's call to us; God acting in our world. Charity, generosity, service to others lead us to God's concern for the poor, the outcast, the broken, the sick.

Prayer and fasting help us to concentrate on what Jesus teaches, on what Jesus did, on what the Holy Spirit is doing now. Prayer and fasting help us to resist (as we will pray on Sunday in

The Great Litany) “all inordinate and sinful affections...” the “deceits of the world, the flesh, and the devil...” Prayer and fasting worked for Jesus in the Wilderness, in the Garden and on the Cross. Prayer and fasting can work for us.

The intensity of Lent combines the physical, the spiritual, the emotional, the intellectual possibilities of human nature to the reality of God’s love, God’s presence, God’s Kingdom, God’s future. Examining our motives, reflecting upon our lives, seeing God at work with a new clarity helps us to know, to share in Christ’s passion and glory. These 40 days offer us an intensity that can prepare us for Easter and for the rest of our lives.

Joel 2:1-2, 12-17

Psalm 103:8-14

2 Corinthians 5:20b—6:10

Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21