

The Rev. Nina Bacas  
 Year C Ash Wednesday March 2, 2022  
 Grace Episcopal Church, Alexandria Virginia  
 Gospel of Matthew 6:1-6,16-21

In the Bible, numbers are more than digits. They have meaning. Three stands for unity, which makes sense with the Trinity. Seven stands for completeness, which make sense with the days of Creation and Sabbath making a full week. We also often see the number 40, which stands for “a long time”.

Most kids know how long it rained on the Ark: 40 days and 40 nights. To receive the 10 Commandments, Moses was on Mount Sinai for the same amount of time. For 40 years, the Israelites wandered in the wilderness before entering the Promised Land. After his baptism in the Jordan River, Jesus lived in the desert for 40 days where he communed with God and faced his adversary. From Noah to Jesus, what do they all have in common? All were preparing for the gift of a new life. The Bible tells us “it takes a long time”.

Taking a long time is important. In Godly Play, we teach that some gifts are so big that if we don’t prepare ourselves for them, we will walk right past them. Not even see them! For this reason, we don’t just show up on Easter morning. We need time to prepare and it may take a long time.

The standard formula for Lenten preparation is what we teach in Sunday school: maintain a discipline of prayer and Scripture-reading, almsgiving, fasting and self-reflection over 40 days. To begin Lent at the 5:30 children’s service today we will sing/sang the “I’m Sorry “ song.

(To the tune of Twinkle Twinkle)  
 Say you are sorry when you are wrong  
 And you will be happy all day long  
 It’s not easy to do good  
 Sometimes we don’t when we should  
 Say you are sorry when you are wrong  
 And you will be happy all day long

As adults in the Episcopal Church, we have our own “I’m Sorry” song. It’s called the sacrament of reconciliation or simply confession. The season of Lent is an appropriate time to receive this Sacrament because it is a means of receiving forgiveness.

You may be wondering, why do I need to do this? Haven’t I have been accepted and forgiven through my baptism? I also confess with my congregation every Sunday before communion. Isn’t that enough? That question is very personal. It varies among each of us. But I will say, that we all violate our baptismal vows. We can’t be re-baptized, so confession is a means to allow forgiveness to renew us once again. Also, maybe there are times in our lives when a public confession during worship just isn’t enough. We may need a private, personal confession with the help of a priest.

You will know, because the sacrament of reconciliation is for those who sense a need for change. Here's how I see it. Just like in our human relationships, we all show certain parts of ourselves to God and we hide other parts. While those around us may not be aware of all our hidden parts, God knows. God knows we stand broken in front of our creator. But showing our whole selves to God is frightening because what if we are judged? What if God smites us? What if we are rejected just like in our human relationships? That's too much to bear.

The good news is that God does not behave like our fellow humans. Confession is not a listing of your sins in front of a judge who delivers a verdict. Confession is an invitation to be closer to God by being truthful about all your parts. About our shame, our regret, our need to forgive, or anything that causes our separateness. It involves asking the question "Where am I right now?" and identifying those parts that God is calling to wholeness. God wants each part of us, regardless of the label we put on it. By opening ourselves in this way, we are inviting God's grace to flow into our lives to do what we can't do on our own. By bringing our broken parts to God we will find a connection that is close and intimate. In his book entitled Reconciliation, Martin Smith explains why. He writes that God already carries our pain. When we confess our painful, broken parts, we are acknowledging God's feelings too and that creates a connection. Here's what really gave me pause. He writes that forgiveness is not something that God grants us. God actually is forgiveness. When you know forgiveness, you know God, and knowing God is a gift for all of us to claim. In fact, your claiming of this gift is God's greatest longing.

Today is the first day of our preparation to enter the gift of Easter. We start with ashes on our forehead to remind us that we are mortal and cracked into parts. The dust reminds us of our need for reconciliation into wholeness in God. It feels a bit gloomy today, but as Christians we hold onto joy knowing that today is step one on a seasonal journey focused on how God is calling us closer. On Easter morning, we will celebrate that that cross is no longer a symbol of gloom but of reconciliation through Christ. No longer a symbol of dread, but now a symbol of the everlasting bridge to God. Whether it is in sacrament or in personal prayer now is the time to step back on that bridge towards God with all your being. After the "I'm Sorry" song, we hear our Easter song: God is Love. God is forgiveness. Let us prepare to claim these biggest gifts of all no matter how long it takes. We may not be happy all day long, but surely we will have peace.