

“Bless the Lord, O My Soul”
A Sermon for Ash Wednesday, Year C
February 6, 2008

The opening verse of Psalm 103 is one of the most powerful and heavenward-looking in all of Scripture. OT scholar Artur Weiser calls Psalm 103 “one of the finest blossoms on the tree of biblical faith. Its roots reach deep down to where the most powerful springs of biblical piety flow...” I have found that assessment to be very true.

My family did not go to church regularly while I was growing up. We would attend regularly for a few months and then not attend again for months or even years at a time. Family life at the Snyder home was not always joyful. Like all families, I suppose, we had our own problems. My mother and father did not always get along and some of this would overflow into how they treated us kids. But, one thing that was constant throughout my growing up was my grandparents’ faith and the Assembly of God Church they attended. We would only visit my grandparents once a year, or when we lived overseas, only once every few years. But, I will never forget the warmth, the love of God present in their church. And I will never forget the pastor of that Church – Pastor D.D. Underwood. He was a big man, bigger than life itself, I thought, and he had a powerful voice. I used to get my grandfather to slick back my hair with gel so I could look just like the pastor. It was, after all, the 1960s.

Many a Sunday Pastor Underwood would usher us into worship with these simple lines from the opening verse of Psalm 103,

“Bless the Lord, O my soul...Bless the Lord, O my soul...and all that is within me, bless His Holy Name...”

He would repeat this several times, until I thought I could actually see the Shekinah glory, the smoky presence, of God come down and over the people of that church. He had ushered us all into to the very presence of God. Artur Weiser again says, “At the root of [verse 1] is the will to hearken to God’s voice, to meet Him face to face, and to open the soul to the impact of His living presence” (p. 658). That is the root of Ash Wednesday, of a Holy Lent, and indeed the whole of the Christian life – to boldly wish to meet God face to

face and open ourselves to His transforming power. And that is exactly what Pastor Underwood embodied when he sang this verse.

Pastor Underwood preached the gospel like I had never heard it preached. He paced up and down across the stage behind the pulpit. There was always a sense of urgency about the gospel to him, for he truly knew that lives were hanging in the balance. He preached that we were sinners of the worst kind. He preached that we had all fallen short of the glory of God. He preached that we all needed help, and desperately.

The great Anglican poet T.S. Eliot sums up the despair in his poem “Ash Wednesday,”

For those who walk in darkness
Both in the day time and in the night time
The right time and the right place are not here
No place of grace for those who avoid the face
No time to rejoice for those who walk among noise and deny the voice

The prophet Joel paints a similarly bleak picture: “Like blackness spread upon the mountains a great and powerful army comes.” The powerful army, the darkness, the blackness, is judgment for our sin, for our wrong-doing and wrong-living. Our sins are so despicable that the prophet Joel says that even “the priests, the ministers of the Lord, weep” (Joel 2:17a). The great ritual of sacrifice in the OT was a messy, smelly, bloody affair, and was meant to signify that sin is ugly and its consequences – the death of a created being -- even uglier. We all know this from personal experience. That is why we are here at this service, on our knees before God.

But, thankfully, that is not the end of the story. Another comes, as T.S. Eliot eloquently puts it, “Who then made strong the fountains and made fresh the springs / Made cool the dry rock and made firm the sand.”

And so, Pastor Underwood also preached that there was an answer; an answer with great power, and glory, and majesty...and compassion. For as the psalmist says, “The Lord is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love...He does not deal with us according to our sins, nor repay us according to our iniquities” (Ps 103:8, 10). Let me say this again, for this is truly Good News....“The Lord is *merciful* and *gracious*, *slow to anger* and *abounding in steadfast love*...**He does not deal with us according to our sins, nor repay us according to our iniquities.**” Praise the Lord!

Every Sunday, week in and week out, Pastor Underwood preached about this answer, Jesus Christ, the Son of the Living God. All we need do is outlined in the prophet Joel,

“Yet even now, says the Lord, return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning; rend your hearts and not your clothing. Return to the Lord, your God, for He is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love...” (Joel 2:12-13).

Today we come into the very presence of God and we come humble and possibly despairing. We come rending our hearts prepared to keep a Holy Lent. Every year we come, defeated or nearly defeated by the cares and troubles of this life, knowing that we are helpless to change on our own. But, again, the words of the psalmist ring in our ears,

“As a father has compassion for his children, so the Lord has compassion for those who fear him. For He knows how we were made; He remembers that we are dust” (Psalm 103:13-14).

The Lord constantly remembers that we are but dust; that though made in His image we are incapable of being good without Him; incapable of change without Him. Today is our day to remember that too. Psalm 51, which is read every Ash Wednesday, gives us great hope when the Lord says that He looks “for truth deep within me” (vs. 7a). Allow yourself to know that we can do nothing without Him. Allow Him, and Him alone to create in you a clean heart (vs. 11a). And so we humble ourselves before Him, we give the gift of our contrite hearts, and we ask the Lord to come back into our lives, more fully, more completely, more truly, and make us the people He would have us be. In short, we ask earnestly for forgiveness, for mercy, and then for strength. And we know that God the Father will grant it, willingly, graciously, in the Name of Jesus Christ and His most precious blood.

This is the treasure that we can store up in heaven as discussed in Matthew’s Gospel -- That we are but dust -- That we can do nothing on our own -- That we need constantly, daily, to repent and return to the Lord, for He is the great lover of souls. That true repentance ushers us into the presence of God Himself, again, and again, and again.

Amen.

*Gregory A. Snyder +
St. John's Parish
Johns Island, SC*

Meditation prior to imposition of ashes:

In a moment, I will ask each one of you to come forward and kneel before the altar to receive ashes on your forehead. The ashes will be applied in the sign of the cross to represent that, even in your repentance just as in baptism, you are marked by Christ and that He, and He alone, is the power for change in your life. Only He can make you whole, make you truly who you have been called to be.

May you keep a Holy Fast throughout this Lent:

Fast from judging others; feast on the Christ indwelling in them.

Fast from emphasis on differences; feast on the unity of all life.

Fast from apparent darkness; feast on the reality of life.

Fast from words that pollute; feast on phrases that purify.

Fast from discontent; feast on gratitude.

Fast from anger; feast on patience.

Fast from pessimism; feast on optimism.

Fast from worry; feast on trust.

Fast from complaining; feast on appreciation.

Fast from negatives; feast on affirmatives.

Fast from unrelenting pressures; feast on unceasing prayer.

Fast from hostility; feast on nonviolence.

Fast from bitterness; feast on forgiveness.

Fast from self-concern; feast on compassion for others.

Fast from personal anxiety; feast on eternal truth.

Fast from discouragement; feast on hope.

Fast from facts that depress; feast on truths that uplift.

Fast from lethargy; feast on enthusiasm.

Fast from suspicion; feast on truth.

Fast from thoughts that weaken; feast on promises that inspire.

Fast from idle gossip; feast on purposeful silence.

A Lenten Prayer (Unknown author)

[Read Prayer for Imposition of Ashes, *BCP*, p. 265]