



SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

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ASH WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 14, 2024

ISAIAH 58:1-12; PSALM 103:8-14; 2 CORINTHIANS 5:20-6:10; MATTHEW 6:1-6,16-21

THE JOURNEY DEEP DOWN

Matthew 6:1-6,16-21 *[Jesus said, "Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them; for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven. "So whenever you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be praised by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your alms may be done in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you. "And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you. "And whenever you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces so as to show others that they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that your fasting may be seen not by others but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you. "Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."]*

There are many pathways into the wilderness experience that the Season of Lent is designed to hold. We can follow Jesus on his 40-day desert journey and draw inspiration from him. We can heed the scriptural prompts delivered to us today: beware of the pitfalls that come when

spiritual hypocrisy ensnares us. We can contemplate our ashen foreheads and the dusty words of mortality that remind us we were not created invincible despite all the worldly deceptions that try to convince us otherwise. We can ponder what we give up in Lent, or what we take on, in hopes that

such redirection might land us on a more life-giving and meaningful path.

These are all worthwhile approaches into Lent, but undergirding all of them is the invitation to go down and in, to take this Lenten time to mine the depths of being where shadows and spiritual truth mingle. Annie Dillard, in *Teaching a Stone to Speak*, described it this way:

"In the deeps are the violence and terror of which psychology has warned us. But if you ride these monsters deeper down, if you drop with them farther over the world's rim, you find what our sciences cannot locate or name, the substrate, the ocean or matrix or ether which buoys the rest, which gives goodness its power for good and evil its power for evil, the unified field: our complex and inexplicable caring for each other, and for our life together here. This is given. It is not learned."¹

Every Ash Wednesday I read an essay by Parker Palmer entitled *Leading from Within* that invites me into this deeper journey of Lenten spiritual work. The essay is actually a chapter from his book *Let Your Life Speak* which I'd commend to you. He draws inspiration from Annie Dillard's spiritual

imagery I just shared and translates it this way: "She's saying that we must go in and down and that on the way down and in, we will meet the violence and terror we have within ourselves, that we project outward onto our institutions, onto our society. She's talking about...projecting what we hate within ourselves onto somebody else...as well as connecting with the deep place where we are in community with each other underneath our brokenness."^{2 3}

They are both speaking, of course, about the human propensity to sin, but I know we don't like talking about sin. Ash Wednesday invites us to anyway, not to beat us up, or to beat us down with deprave pronouncements, but precisely to invite us into the deep work, to go in and down far enough to find the good that is there, within us, deeply seated.

We can scratch the surface and speak of sin as a tally of life's peccadilloes that cumulatively form a personal economy of moral value—the bigger the sum total, the further you are away from earning any

² Palmer, Parker J. "Leading from Within," *Let Your Life Speak: Listening for the Voice of Vocation*. John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2000.

³ Some of the thematic elements draw inspiration from a sermon preached by Judy Liro in 2000 which I have in my files. I cannot locate an online source to cite.

¹ From *Teaching a Stone to Talk*, as cited in Parker Palmer's article. Harper, 2013.

chance of God's good graces. To leave it there misses the point. Hegel called this approach to sin little more than crowd control cloaked in religious language, but sin is more than just scorekeeping across life's momentary decisions. It is the state of contradiction to the true self, the one to be found deep down and in, beyond the violence and terror we do to ourselves. Sin is the state of being cut-off from that true place, or the state of being entrapped in places that are not life-giving.

Sin is the lie we tell ourselves in the dark stillness of night that God could never love "me," so what does any of it matter anyway. Sin is the lie we tell ourselves that if I'm going to make it in this life, I have to do it myself. (Parker Palmer calls that functional atheism.) Sin is the lie that convinces us to project what we don't like about ourselves onto others, or onto the institutions in our lives. They become the problem, the pressure valve within us gets a brief release, but then in the dark stillness once more the monsters still come to us.

Ash Wednesday invites us to go deeper down, past the terror and violence we do to ourselves and others, and to find the unifying wholeness of relationship and to be liberated by it. We yearn for this liberating

future, this new life within. Our prayers today express the deep longing for such things, and the hope that it is possible. With God, all things are possible.

We don't go down into the brokenness to get trapped there. Sin serves as something of an alarm that cajoles us from our sleepy deceptions and awakens us to the truth that God is not "out there" somewhere, but resides deeper down and in, where our sense of relatedness unfolds to the unifying power of God's love. We need not go it alone; we cannot go it alone if we are to find our way. This is why we celebrate the Eucharist on Ash Wednesday—to remind us of the communal reality of healing connection. Wherever you are on your spiritual journey, you are welcome at God's table.

Importantly, this deep-down place is also the locus of true forgiveness, given and received. The monsters whisper their lies that there are things we have done that cannot be forgiven. These same monsters yell that there are things others have done to us that cannot be forgiven. The divine truth spoken deeper down is that nothing that has happened, no matter how tragic or awful, can hold us captive forever.

Finally, the Lenten journey deep down is all predicated on the truth that God can

overcome evil, and does, and yearns for us to discover that in our lives. Our Lenten hope is not misplaced because the creative power of the cosmos is with us and for us in unrelenting love and an abiding relationship

waiting to be discovered and rediscovered by each of us time and again. May your Lenten journey take you deep down and in and through to new life.



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