

A Penitent Journey – Lent One – February 21, 2021

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The penitent season is upon us. Lent has arrived, and for the next 40 days we will embark on a journey, walking alongside Jesus as he makes his way to the cross. For 30-some years, Jesus had been living among the common people in Israel, a nation occupied by a foreign government. His baptism in the Jordan River and his 40 days of prayer and meditation in the wilderness prompted him to go public with a message. When he began his ministry, he modeled a better way to live, a life of compassion and service to others, and he demonstrated God's forgiveness and love. His journey led him to laugh and dine with sinners and to confront and rebuke religious leaders.

His was not a passive journey. He challenged inequality and knocked down barriers between groups. He called others to deny themselves. His message was counter-cultural, denouncing power and greed. He spoke out harshly against injustice. He pronounced God's favor on the outcasts and the marginalized. He called out the religious leaders for their hypocrisy in teaching and their apathy toward the poor. He recognized the sinful nature of humankind and demanded we live the way God intended for us. His condemnation of the status quo led to his arrest and tragic death.

He experienced the worst that humanity could do in order to demonstrate the best that humanity could be.

For us, Lent is a journey that pushes us to contemplate our own culpability. The path of introspection is challenging for many of us, even more so when we are pushed to search out those areas where we fall short. Having to dwell on our misdeeds and root out those inclinations that encourage us to transgress, is never a cheery endeavor. Let alone, in the midst of pandemic that has disrupted our lives for almost a year. Perhaps we have had more than enough opportunity for looking inward.

On Thursday I read an essay on the Presbyterian Writers Guild website by Dean Myers who was reflecting on the symbolism of Ash Wednesday in the midst of the difficulty of this past year, with sickness, death, economic crises, racial injustice, political upheaval. He wrote, "I have had more than enough of dust and ashes, stirred up by a virus that clings, sin-like, so close as to take our breath away." He expresses what so many of us are feeling. We are overwhelmed. I get it. I feel it too.

[Presbyterian Mission Agency Poem, essay, liturgy garner top honors from Presbyterian Writers Guild | Presbyterian Mission Agency](#)

This year has in many ways been overwhelming. I think it is right that we acknowledge that. And if it is something that is too much for you to manage, there are ways to address that. And I encourage you to do so.

For others of us, the feeling of being overwhelmed can be used as an excuse to avoid the injustices and the pain that exists in the world right now, pandemic or no pandemic. Turning our eyes away from seeing reality does not make the reality go away.

If you watched the service from last Sunday, you saw a young boy from our church give the Minute for Mission. I checked with his mom, and it's okay for me to talk about him. Alex and his Scout Troop was helping pack bags at the Food Pantry. Afterward, Chuck, our Food Pantry coordinator, asked Alex some questions and videoed his responses. Alex is 8 years old; his answers were incredibly perceptive. He is a child who recognizes the unfairness of the world. He wonders why people are starving. And he knows it is right and feels good to help them. He said to not help would be unchristian. Then he mentioned people who are homeless, especially concerned about them due to the frigid temperatures that we've been experiencing lately. He worries about them. And then he said. "Take a moment to think about the people who don't have homes." And he paused and said again. "Just take a moment to think about it."

An 8-year-old boy is concerned about people who are homeless and wants us to think about that. He sure is.

Last summer I was talking with a teen who has a passion for social justice issues. This was around the time when George Floyd was killed by a police officer in Minneapolis. This event had a huge impact on her, and she was greatly frustrated. She saw injustice, and she wanted to know why the church wasn't doing anything about it.

When we think about things like homeless people outside in the winter or people of color who continue to struggle for equality and justice, how does that impact us? Again, it's easy to dismiss those things. After all, they are unpleasant to think about and it's a bigger problem than any of us can address. Sometimes we just don't care. Avoidance and apathy.

As I was thinking about this message over the past few days, a Billy Joel song popped into my head, and I kept playing it over and over in my mind. This song, *We Didn't Start the Fire*, was a huge hit back in 1989. Joel aged 40, wrote it in response to a young friend, who was 21. The younger man was talking about and agonizing over all the horrendous things going on in the world at that time. So in response, Joel looked back at the major world events from his lifetime and listed them in the song. The chorus goes like this, "We didn't start the fire, It's been always burning since the world's been turning, We didn't start the fire, No, we didn't light it, but we tried to fight it." [Billy Joel – We Didn't Start the Fire Lyrics | Genius Lyrics](#) from a book *In Their Own Words: Songwriters Talk about the Creative Process*, Greenwood Publishing Group, 2004.

Every generation has its own issues to address and deal with. This has been the case from the beginning. The issues may evolve with the times, but they exist. The fire continues to burn, and each generation is called to fight it. As Jesus told his followers in the first century, there is a better way to live. A life of justice, compassion, healing, fairness, love, equity and equality. A life that Jesus modeled for us and that God has called us to live.

We learn to live in this way as a result of growing closer to Christ and with God's Spirit residing within us. It's a selfless way of life. As young Alex said in his Minute for Mission, it produces a good feeling inside – not the type of good when you know you're getting amazing Christmas presents, it's a different type of good. It's better.

Lent provides an intentional opportunity to grow in our relationship to God. This is spiritual discipline, of setting aside time in our daily living to study and reflect on God. If you've never done this before, or if it's been a while, we have provided three separate devotionals to help you. Each one is different, two are daily devotionals, one is a weekly devotion. We have offered to print the devotional packets, if you don't like reading it on your computer, or we have several Lent-in-a-Bag bags left at the church. That devotional is only once a week. Everyone can find 15 minutes to a half hour once a week to spend on their spiritual life, and that is in addition to watching the worship service.

If you aren't a member of the church and would like a devotional, let us know and we will get one to you. Or if you need help getting started, let me know, and I'll be happy to help.

Becoming a follower of Jesus Christ is an ongoing process of learning, changing, growing, and doing. It's not going to happen overnight, and it requires intentional work on each of our parts. The Season of Lent is a perfect time to get started. Many people think about giving something up, like chocolate. I'm not sure how that is supposed to help you draw closer to God? Instead, why not take something on? 15 minutes. 15 minutes to focus on God. I know you can do it.