

Commentary on the Gospel for Wed, Feb 13th 2013

But many decades later, a look at today's readings changes my perspective and seems to invite us into a hopeful joy. God invites us to "return to me with your whole heart" and we ask God in return to "create a clean heart for me and a steadfast spirit renew within me."

Rather than being melancholy, Lent invites us into a deep joy, for we are known by God as imperfect people but we are loved by God as forgiven. The deeply forgiving love God extends to us is like an invitation to renew our relationship with God.

Yes, it might be a period of simplicity, paring down and clearing away the things that are getting in the way between us and God. Lent can be a time to take a clear-eyed look at ourselves and honestly see who we are, just as God does. But it's a time of great hope, as we realize how much God longs for a relationship with us.

That doesn't mean we focus on us and our failings, but we can look at the way our lack of freedom gets in the way of our relationships with God. An honest look at ourselves as flawed creatures of God doesn't mean we give up. Rather we can rejoice in knowing that there is nothing we have done, no act or way of life, no hidden sin so deeply tucked away in our souls, that God does not forgive in us.

Can we imagine the next six weeks as time to spend with one who loves us so much, who forgives and comforts us and rejoices in our love? And isn't that celebration of love even deeper and more joyful if we have been separated from God for a while?

Today many of us will have our foreheads marked by a cross of ashes. It is a shocking symbol of our own mortality and of the sacrifice Jesus made for us with his death. It is also a public marking that reminds us - and others - of God's message to us, "I created you for myself and gave you my only son to free you from sin and death. Even now, I am calling you, drawing you closer to myself so that someday, I can celebrate with you a never ending banquet of love."

The ashes on our forehead are more than a symbol of our own mortality. They are a sign of God fighting for our freedom from this world, liberating us from the clutches of so many things that drag us away from God.

Today Jesus is calling us to himself in an ever-deeper way, inviting us into his endless forgiveness and asking us to return to his loving embrace. With tears of joy, we can accept his outstretched arms.
When I was a girl my sense of Ash Wednesday was that we were lost. Now I see that we are found!

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