

St. Columba's Episcopal Church
Ash Wednesday – March 2, 2022
The Rev. Dr. Susan Kraus

The prophet Isaiah, who spoke on behalf of God in the call to repentance we heard a few minutes ago (Isaiah 58:1-12), also spoke for us in these words: “All we like sheep have gone astray; we have all turned to our own way” (Isaiah 53:6). Today we begin a season of penitence that lasts until Easter, a time for being honest with ourselves and with God about how we have gone astray and turned to our own way.

Honest confession is the beginning of repentance and change. It isn't a step we can omit if we hope to love God more deeply and walk more closely with Jesus in the coming days of our lives. The season of Lent is a time to look into our hearts and to look at our lives with a desire to know the truth, even when the truth is uncomfortable and painful. This takes courage. We will make a beginning together this afternoon in the prayers of this service. But what we do together is only a beginning. The harder work will need to happen in secret. As Jesus instructed, “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” (Matthew 6:6). Confession opens the way for God to work in our hearts, to draw us closer, to remind us of God's way of life and love, and to strengthen us for our journey of faith.

Today as the ashes are placed on our foreheads, we will hear these words, “Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.” Remember that you are a mortal being, one who will die. Though we may push this truth out of our awareness, we know that “our days are numbered.” Why do we need this reminder of our mortality on Ash Wednesday? So that we will take the process of repentance – of returning to God – seriously. The time to do the work is now.

Honest self-examination and confession will help us discover how to keep a holy Lent, how to change what we know is keeping us from receiving God's love and from growing in faith and in love. Remember that our goal is to grow closer to God, and to love God, our neighbors, and ourselves more truly. We are all at different points in our spiritual growth. That means that each of us will have different blocks to faith and love – “sins,” if you want to use that language. It takes courage to look at ourselves honestly and see where and how we fail to live in the way of love. It takes even more courage to change what we do. Lent may be the right time for each of us to make a change. A word of caution: don't aim too high too soon! It can be a temptation to set unrealistic spiritual goals for ourselves, goals we will surely fail to reach. With a humble spirit choose a small change to work on every day. Only step by step, with many false starts and failures, do we progress on the way of love and of following Jesus.

It is the custom of many Christians to “give up” something during Lent. If that is the path that you take, then choose wisely. Give up something that blocks you in your love for God or hardens your heart against another child of God or harms your health and well-being. If you choose to give up a habit of self-indulgence, consider setting aside the money that habit would have cost you and giving it, in compassion, to help someone in need.

You may decide not to “give up” anything in Lent, but rather to “take on” a special practice. You may set aside a time to pray regularly, with The Book of Common Prayer or another book of prayers. You may choose to read scripture every day. This year we are reading Luke’s Gospel on Sunday mornings, and you might read this Gospel to yourselves, allowing time for imaginative meditation and prayer. Or you might choose to do other holy reading. You might also take on a daily practice of charity toward others. One of the most significant seasons of Lent that I recall from my own life is when I intentionally chose to do something every day to help someone else. Some days that was a phone call or a note or a word of appreciation, some days it was a trip to the local thrift shop with a donation, some days it was sending a check to a charitable organization. I never had any problem finding something I could do to encourage and support another person.

I want to encourage you to plan to make the season of Lent a special time, a time set apart from the rest of the year, a holy time. I have sometimes heard church people say, “I hate Lent! It’s so depressing!” You may feel that way. It can be depressing if we focus on sin and guilt too much, or if we set ourselves goals that we fail to achieve. Remember that this season is a season of preparation for our yearly celebration of the resurrection of Christ. We are headed from death to life – life that is more full of life than we can even imagine now.

“All we like sheep have gone astray; we have all turned to our own way.” Yes, that is the truth, but God has not left us alone to wander and stray. We have Jesus, who said: “I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father” (John 10:14-15).

May the love of our Good Shepherd, Jesus, give us the courage and strength to confess our faults and return to God this afternoon and in the weeks ahead. In Jesus’ name. Amen.