

Many preachers often begin by overstating the importance of the topic or scripture passage at hand. But today, overstating how meaningful the Ash Wednesday liturgy with its readings would be hard to do. The season of Lent with its emphasis on repentance *“offers us an opportunity to stop, reflect on who we are and whose we are, adopt an attitude of humility.”*¹ In computer language it offers us a time *to* hit the reset button, and begin again. Our opening Collect for Ash Wednesday reminds us that “God hates nothing (he has) made and forgives the sins of all who are penitent.”² In this confidence, we can boldly pray, “Create and make in us new and contrite hearts.”³ This theme is reinforced by our reading from the prophet Joel, who was commanded by God to “Blow the trumpet in Zion; sound an alarm on my holy mountain?”⁴ In making his prophetic trumpet sound clear and intelligible, he tells God’s people, “Return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning.”⁵

Such admonitions to change are never easy to implement. For this reason, the Church has dedicated the season of Lent as a time to discern what is central to our lives in Christ and put things that are peripheral into perspective. These days give us time for clarification and purification. It is a time to winnow away the chaff, and as we do so, we will come back in touch with what is essential to our spiritual health and well-being, for

¹ The Rev. Kirk Alan Kubicek, Sermons that Work, “Holy Dust: Ash Wednesday,” www.episcopalchurch.org/sermons

² BCP, Collect for Ash Wednesday, p. 264

³ Ibid.

⁴ Joel 2:1

⁵ Joel 2:12

without it, we can never ripen into our full potential as sons and daughters of God.

The New Testament teaches us that through one man sin entered into the world. Yet through another man, Jesus Christ, abundant grace and the gift of righteousness can be received.⁶ Therefore, Paul implores us in our New Testament lesson reading, “be reconciled to God.”⁷ Paul then says, “Now is the acceptable time; see, now is the day of salvation!”⁸ Therefore, now is the time to hit that reset button and “lay aside every weight and sin which clings so closely.”⁹

As we begin to run the Lenten race laid out for us, we are given the Litany of Penitence as part of our Ash Wednesday service as a guide. This prayer instructs us to examine our hearts in the light of God’s holy word and commandments, for without it, we are left unprotected and exposed to spiritual shipwreck.

Kristen Holmberg, a writer for the Daily Bread devotional, shared a story about Hungarian-born mathematician Abraham Wald lent his skills to the World War II efforts after coming to the United States in 1938. The military was looking for ways to protect its aircraft from enemy fire, so Wald and his colleagues at the Statistical Research Group were asked to figure out how to protect military aircraft better to defend against enemy fire. They began by examining returning aircraft to see where they were most damaged. But Wald is credited with the keen insight that damage on returning aircraft represented only where a plane

⁶ Romans 5:12 & 17 (paraphrased)

⁷ 2 Corinthians 5:20

⁸ 2 Corinthians 6:2

⁹ Hebrews 12:1

could be hit and still survive. He realized that areas most in need of additional armor would be found on planes that had crashed. Airplanes hit in the most vulnerable part—the engine—had gone down and therefore couldn’t (easily) be examined.¹⁰

We know from scripture that the heart is the engine room of our spiritual lives. It is the seat of our physical, mental, and spiritual life; from within it flows the springs of life or things that defile a person.¹¹ The heart was created by God as the dwelling place of the Holy Spirit, which God has promised to pour out upon us. But like all soul work, Abraham Wald’s illustration teaches us that we have to examine the wreckage of our lives, as well as learn from the mistakes of others. Examples abound in scripture, from David, who sinned with Bathsheba, to Peter, who denied our Lord. Fortunately, their sins were forgiven, but the record of the wreckage their sins caused contain lessons for us to examine. Learning from others inspired Solomon to instruct his son to “guard [his] heart with all diligence”¹² “for discretion will watch over you, and understanding will guard you.”¹³ God’s instructions guide us through life, steering us away from being shot down by poor decisions.

Therefore in the name of the Church, I invite you “to the observance of a holy Lent, by self-examination and repentance, by prayer, fasting, and self-denial; and by reading and meditation on God’s holy Word.”¹⁴

¹⁰ Our Daily Bread Devotional, February 21, 2023, www.odb.org

¹¹ See Proverbs 4:11 and Mark 7:21-23

¹² Proverbs 4:23

¹³ Proverbs 2:11

¹⁴ Ash Wednesday Exhortation, BCP, p. 265