

Saint Thomas' Church  
Ash Wednesday  
March 6, 2019  
rmcneely+

. . . remember o man  
of dust thou art  
and to dust thou shalt return

And so with this chilling reminder of our mortality ringing in our ears

And crosses of ashes emblazoned on our foreheads

We begin the 40-day journey

To the Resurrection  
to Christ

For centuries Orthodox Christians have put themselves through Lent.

That somber and sobering time

We spend

Examining our souls

Our conscience

Our lives

To isolate, consider and repent

The sins of our lives

It can be a painful 40 days

As we examine some of the worst times of our lives.

Why have Christians put themselves through it?

Why to we put ourselves through it?

I want remind you of a story written by Edgar Allen Poe in 1843

He named it

The Tell-Tale Heart.

Maybe you remember it.

The story is told by a young man

Who committed a murder, a cruel and foul murder

Of an innocent old man.

He buried the body under the basement of his house  
    Where no one would ever find it.  
But faintly at first  
    And increasing in volume  
He heard the heartbeat under the basement floor  
    From two floors above in his bedroom.  
At first he heard it only in his sleep  
    But then  
    During his waking hours at night.  
It got louder and louder  
    Ringing in his ears.  
After a time he heard it in the daylight  
And later he could hear nothing else.  
He was convinced he was going mad.

As he verged on lunacy  
    He had a realization.  
What he heard was not coming from below the basement  
What he heard was not the heart of the man he had murdered  
It was his own heart  
    Beating in his chest  
    Beating out his guilt  
        His conscience  
        With a perpetual reminder of his crime.  
        That he could never outrun  
        Never quiet  
        Never overcome.  
Fiction, you say?  
Perhaps.

Poe wrote it over 175 years ago.  
But his acute mastery of human nature  
    Is as fresh as if he wrote it yesterday  
    And as timeless as eternity.

Our sins consume us.  
From the little ones to the big ones  
They eat at our soul.  
Their magnitude is only a matter of degree  
But the result is the same.

Where a soul once was  
There is left a hole.  
And in its place is built a wall  
A solid stone wall is built  
Sin by sin by sin.

A wall separating us from God.  
From the love of God  
From redemption  
From salvation  
From heaven

A wall separating us from each other  
A wall of guilt, of shame, of embarrassment

We become isolated  
And in danger.

The odor of it repels  
The odor of it attracts satan and those who do his will.  
And the un-abolved sin begets another and another.

I want to tell you another story.

It is about King David,  
The boy who slayed Goliath and saved a nation.  
The shepherd boy who became one of the great Kings of the  
Hebrew Nation.

It was a hot evening in Jerusalem  
And David took to the roof of his palace  
Where he could gain respite from the evening heat.

And as he gazed out at his capital city  
He saw a woman that intrigued him.

She was entirely naked in a bath down below.

He stared and became besotted of her.

She was Bathsheba

The wife of one of David's soldiers who was serving far from Jerusalem.

David was King and ordered her to be brought to him.

He bedded her.

An adulterous relationship was formed.

A baby was conceived.

David was suddenly mortified.

How could he overcome the shame?

He came upon a plan.

He would order Uriah, the husband of Bathsheba

Home to Jerusalem

Uriah, would lie with Bathsheba

And when the baby was born, Uriah would claim it as his own

The plan failed.

Uriah would not have the joys of his marital bed

While his men suffered in battle.

What to do?

David came upon another plan

He would order Uriah back into battle

And would quietly order that he be abandoned by his troops

Uriah was killed in battle.

David took Bathsheba as a wife.

But the babe was still-born.

A prophet Nathan learned of David's iniquity.

In the court he approached David with a tale

He said there was a creditor who was owed a great sum.

He went to the debtor to collect.

But instead of selecting from the flock

He chose a lamb

A lamb that was beloved of the debtors young son.

The debtor pleaded that he could take any number of sheep  
 But please spare the one that his son had raised and loved.  
 The debtor slew the lamb as the boy watched  
 Tossed his head in laughter as he rode away.  
 Nathan asked David what sort of man was his creditor  
 And what shall be done with him.  
 David was enraged and by decree demanded to know the name of  
 the scoundrel so that David himself could behead him.  
 In a quiet voice Nathan said:  
 O King. You art that man.

David saw who he had become.  
 After a time he wrote a psalm of remorse and penitence.  
 You read it a moment ago.  
 It is psalm 51.  
 Now that you know the story behind it, the back story  
 Read it again tonight.

We have one incredible advantage over David.  
 We have a saviour  
 Who has paid the price for our sins  
 With his life.  
 Every minute of every day is filled with the opportunity to  
 Seek the forgiveness of God  
 To confess our sins to He who knows them all.  
 With a remorseful heart to seek  
 His forgiveness and absolution.

Why do Christians observe the discipline and rigors of Lent?

Let me tell you a final story from the first century AD.  
 It took place in Korea.  
 There were twin boys.  
 Who as they grew into manhood  
 Took very different pathways.

One was degenerate  
And followed a life of crime.  
As each new crime succeeded the one before  
they we increasingly serious in nature.  
Finally he was caught, tried and convicted to a sentence of death.

The conviction was appealed to highest court of the land  
Where sat the other brother  
The most respected and just judge in Korea.  
All thought that a brother could not condemn another brother to  
death and a way would be found to reverse the judgment of death.

But the judgement was sustained. The criminal brother would die  
by the order of the Judge brother.

In Korea, sentences are carried out promptly.  
A day before the execution was scheduled.  
The judge came to visit the criminal in prison.  
They were identical twins and the Judge told his brother to change  
places with him and to walk away a free man.  
The criminal brother jumped at the chance  
Secretly believing that the government would never  
Execute its highest judge.

On the day of the execution, the criminal sat atop a hillside to  
enjoy the spectacle when the truth was revealed.  
But to his horror he watched as his brother died.

He as grief stricken and ran to the prison gate  
And told them of the mistake and insisted that he be  
executed.

He was told to remain at the gate.  
 After a time, the guard returned  
 And said he had thoroughly scrutinized the records  
 And there was no crime committed by a man of that name  
 And there was no sentence of death on a man of that name.  
 It was gone.

So are our absolved sins gone.  
 As if they never occurred.  
 We are restored to life anew  
     And given a new chance at eternity.  
 The wall of separation is removed, stone by stone by stone.  
 The love of God restored,  
     The grace of God again pours down upon us.  
 And our absolved sins are as if they had never existed.

We start the season of Lent with the taste of ashes.  
 The burnt up remains of what had once been thriving with life.  
     Something that was whole and complete  
     A moment of life  
     Palm branches  
 It is not unexpected that this sign of destruction  
     marks the beginning of our preparation for the end of our life.  
     and the foretaste  
     the touch  
     of our resurrection in Christ.

So why do we observe the discipline of Lent?  
 Archbishop Morse wrote:  
 “Lent is a period of preparation  
 for Christians to enter into the ultimate mystery of our existence  
     the resurrection-Easter

The meaning of Lent is to go up to Jerusalem with Jesus  
     To enter into His passion and death.  
 Allowing us to comprehend the ultimate reality of our Faith  
     Resurrection.”

“The Christian mystery is that we suffer with and for Him.

And He suffers with us.

We die with Him in His death

And He with us in our death.

We at the end will share with Him in His resurrection

and the gift of eternal life.

To enter into the Passion of Christ is to love through tragedy.

A common rejection of belief in God is that if there was a God

He would not let the innocent suffer.

But that would nullify the Crucifixion.

T.S. Eliot writes:

‘Again in spite of that we call this Friday, good. The suffering of the only innocent in human history.’

We go up to Jerusalem in Lent.

The meaning of Lent is the suffering of the Passion and the death of Jesus.

Together in union with Him, we will share His resurrection.

St Paul writes ‘for I reckon that the sufferings of this present time

Are not worthy to be compared

With the glory which shall be revealed in us.’”.

Let us journey together

Up to Jerusalem

To Resurrection



