

Forty Days

REMEMBER THAT YOU ARE DUST

Ash Wednesday Video

Sometimes only song can speak of the depths of our hearts.
Like these psalms, are ancient songs,
sung with string instrument
these songs are our songs
In this Psalm, we sense a pain
and ache that calls out to all
Deep cries to deep,
In a dark and familiar place,
where few of us care to linger,
that place of loneliness
and sorrow
and emptiness
without geography
or landscape
a place tuned in a minor key.
tone dark and somber.
dissonance, spaces between beats,
measures are strung out and notes hang their heads

David dwelt here, accompanied only by guilt
His hands stained in blood and treachery
He reached for what was not his to take
Adam taking from the fruit
Tasting the sweetness of knowing good and evil
Tasting the bitterness of lost innocence
And he saw his nakedness
Lovers who are now ashamed to see each other
As they truly are
And Adam came to realize that he was only man made from dust
And David came to know that he was only a shepherd boy made a king
They are made creatures
Adam from adama
Humans from dust
To have a breath of life

poured into this fragile container

But there is one who knew
The frailty of existence like no other
The one who was God in flesh and bones
There was no place he could retreat, when pain pursued
He could no longer be everywhere, and do anything
Now he was one of us,
touching what we touch
feeling what we feel
being no where else but with us
Immanuel

Last Thursday the dead palms in our front yard
Were taken down
They had died in our summer draught
What were tall and noble
Were shedding their dead palm branches
And were easily fell¹
I picked up their leaves to make ashes
and placed them on top of a brass bowl
and lit them
a pyre for the remnants of palms

And looking into the fire
That embraced the leaves
I see myself
Getting older and envying youth
And as each year slips my grasp
I ask myself what have I done in this world
What difference I have made
Tracing the boundaries of my soul
A black silhouette
That looks back at me

¹ Augustine writes in his exposition of the Psalms: “For this it was set forth, for this [it] was written, for this in the Church often read and chanted: let them hear that have not fallen, lest they fall; let them hear that have fallen, that they may rise.”

And I slowly realize
My existence,
my being
my very breath
is held together by hands and heart
greater than what I can understand
or imagine
or hope for

Like David
I wait for deliverance
The longing for heaven²
Like Adam
I wait for another chance to take,
a stroll with God through the garden
the breaking dawn in a new day

Questions for Reflection

1. Adam's name is derived from the word *adama*, meaning dirt. This speaks of where he came from and to where he will return. How are our lives like this?
2. In what ways do we often come to encounter our sin and shame like David and Adam? How do these times remind us of our dependence on God?
3. What things in our lives do we need to lay down into the "pyre"? What things have "fallen" in our lives that we need to put away?
4. How can you answer the question "What difference I have made?"

² Cardinal Pierre d'Ailly (1351-1420) in the high Middle Ages places this psalm among the seven Penitential Psalms in the Bible. He describes this Psalm as a "longing for heaven."

5. How might Ash Wednesday help you long for “deliverance”?

Practices of Lent

The above piece was written for an Ash Wednesday service several years ago for a community that I pastored. It was part of a liturgy for Ash Wednesday and there are references to my own personal story strewn throughout the poem. My intent was to tell a piece of my story through the greater narrative of the story of shame, guilt, loss, redemption, and hope. If we look closely, we will see these stories in our everyday experience. There have been no “burning bush” encounters in my life (and there may never be), but in the every day of life there are encounters that try to call my attention that I am part of a greater narrative.

The liturgical season of Lent was created to mark Jesus’s journey into the wilderness and to prepare us for Holy Week. It starts with Ash Wednesday, when many Christians are marked with the sign of the cross on their foreheads in order to remember their mortality. On this day, the celebrant recites the words: “Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.” Lent is more than a period of self-denial and the giving up of indulgences. We are reminded that we are fragile, temporary, and dependent creatures. Adam’s story is that he was made of the dirt (*adama*) and to it he would return. He was a person who was made to live forever with God, but his disobedience caused his expulsion from the garden, where he would never again eat from the tree of life.

For many of us, we are attempting to return to this paradise, to commune with God in the way Adam and Eve did. Our attempts at eternal youth and beauty are all but a longing to “eat from the tree of life and live forever.”³ But more often than not, we return to the shame and guilt of paradise. Many of us see our reaching for the fruit as a slap to the hand. We cannot achieve what we seek, in our relationships, our careers, our projects. Even our greatest successes start to fade and sometimes we are left wondering about the worth of our accomplishments. What is truly meaningful? What is worth doing?

³ Genesis 3:22

To enter into these questions is not to enter into despair, but to enter into longing. It is to yearn for a time and place where the things we do had meaning and purpose. It is an invitation to strip away all that might encumber our lives and live in *centered-ness* and freedom. How might you take a first step in this season of lent?

Further Reading

Greg Pennoyer (editor), Lauren F. Winner, Kathleen Norris, Richard Rohr, and Scott Cairns, *God for Us: Rediscovering the Meaning of Lent and Easter* (Paraclete Press, 2013).

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *God Is on the Cross: Reflections on Lent and Easter*, (Westminster John Knox Press, 2012).