

“Ash Wednesday Meditation”

I am, and suspect I always will be, a Midwesterner at heart. I grew up in Iowa, I met my wife in Minnesota, and I officially own more Green Bay Packers items now than I ever knew I needed. There is a Midwesterner mentality that has subtly attached itself to the hydrogen-oxygen molecules that come out of our faucets. This mentality manifests itself in my life in a variety of ways. For example, when I come to potlucks at church I expect at minimum three jell-o salads, some with fruit or veggies suspended weightlessly or gobs of cool whip on top. I define comfort food in the form of a hamburger rather than a lobster roll. It means even though I have never visited Lake Wobegon, I know many of the residents who call that place home.

Midwestern sensibilities guide not only our “if you can’t say anything nice don’t say anything at all” motto of living, but also our faith and the way we seek to be church together. Our spirituality, the way we connect with the sacred, is impacted and influenced by our surroundings. We know the beauty of watching God’s creation through the seasons. We watch as endless miles covered with blinding white snow will eventually give way in a scant few months to horizon blocking stalks of corn. We taste the indescribable sacredness of a tomato plucked from our own backyard. Our geography, the landscape, this place we call home, is inextricably woven into the ways we live out our faith and our geography contributes to deeper meanings in the life we live here in Wisconsin.

Barbara Brown Taylor’s book which will serve as a travel guide for our Lenten journey points out that there are countless altars in this world where we can encounter and experience and explore our connection with God. She subtitles the book, “A geography of faith,” which leads us to realize that where we are, what we see when we glance out the window, what we smell and sense when we step out of our car on Sunday morning all of that and our whole surroundings we carry with us into worship and as we strive to connect with God. We might not be able to stand beneath the beauty of a palm tree outside, but we know the feeling and the promise of a palm branch waving in our hands six weeks from today as hopefully, please God, the snow is melting. We might not be able to hear the crashing of waves or smell the salty sea air, but we do know the beautiful melody of the first song bird or how sweet a lily smells in our sanctuary after months of not being able to open the windows. These are sacred moments in our lives and have the possibility of awakening us to God’s presence moving in our midst.

To be sure, we don’t usually associate these moments with the season of Lent. Words like “fasting” or “penance” or “prayer” or “repentance” are more closely wrapped up in our expectations of what we will hear in church the coming weeks. While that is appropriate and important, I think there is a caution that if we only associate practices like fasting or prayer with Lent, then we might miss out on what it could mean to fast together as a church during the summer and then break that fast with a backyard barbeque. Or we miss out on the prayers that come in moments when we sit beneath the shade of the sun in the summer or hear the crunch of leaves in the fall. We might, as we have a tendency to do, compartmentalize and wind up thinking that we’ve been there, done that with these faithful practices, rather than entering into Lent as a time when we can be intentional. Could we view Lent and Lenten practices not just as ways we can connect with God for forty days, but rather as a warm up, a training ground for the remaining forty-five weeks of this year?

The practices you might hear talked about at Wednesday services or encounter if you are reading Barbara Brown Taylor's book are not just for Lent, but can guide us as the seasons change around us, as we sow seeds into the rich soil, as we splash in pools to cool off or feast on apples next fall.

This Lent, I invite you to consider the altars in the world around us. You might even create an altar in your own home, complete with a candle, a cloth your grandmother made or a book your father gave you. Carve out a sacred space and also be open to the sacred spaces you stumble into as you roam about Janesville and live your life. This Lent, I invite you to ponder prayerfully which practices might awaken you to God's presence moving right here. Taylor writes about taking walks outside, talking to your neighbors and even strangers, praying, paying attention to what's going on around you, thinking back over times when you volunteered your time or talents and encountered God in those moments as well as other ways of noticing that God is still creating, still speaking, still very present in our world. We heard today Joel invite us to blast the trumpet and gather for worship. Joel describes worship full of life and full of the very young to the young at heart, how can our worship invite all generations to sing out to God with gusto, not just for Lent but allowing Lent to be a spring board into such worship as our norm?

Matthew invites us to notice what we treasure and where our hearts leap; this Lent can each of us be open and aware and awake to God's presence and might we even share that with someone else over a bowl of soup. It is my prayer that the practices we begin and hear about or even try to take on not cease when we sing "Christ the Lord is Risen Today." It is my prayer that our practices of connecting with God not end at a cross or empty tomb but keep us ever going on the unfolding journey before us. It is my prayer that our practices during these forty days ground us and help point us toward a deeper relationship with God. If we can open ourselves to God in ways we know are meaningful and even try out one or two new practices, if we can talk about these practices as faithful people together, if we can stay open to God's movement in the world around us and the altars built in our midst, if we can find ways to listen and share love, then I sense and trust we will have a holy and blessed and sacred Lent.

Thanks be to God and let the people of God say, "Amen!"