

“I Don’t Want to Do Lent” by the Rev. Michael Marsh

A sermon for Ash Wednesday, 2023, offered at St. Philip’s Episcopal Church, Uvalde

I’m not sure if this is a confession or just a description of where I am these days but I don’t want to do Lent this year. Do you? Let me explain what I mean by that.

We began tonight by praying that we would worthily lament our sins and acknowledge our wretchedness so that we would obtain God’s forgiveness. And you gave that prayer your “Amen.”

I don’t want us to obsess about lamenting, bewailing, or bemoaning our wretchedness, sinfulness, or whatever it is we think somehow makes us bad, defective, or not enough. Lent has never been about going to those places, it’s always been about growing out of and leaving those places.

In a few minutes the Church will invite us “to the observance of a holy Lent by forty days of self-examination and repentance; by prayer, fasting, self-denial; and by reading and meditating on God’s holy Word”? I hear that and the old voices in my head start asking, *What are you giving up for Lent this year? What will you take on? What are you going to do? Be good Mike. You need to do something lenty.* Maybe you hear those voices too.

I don’t want us to turn Lent into another program for self-improvement as if we are nothing more than the sum of what we have done and left undone.

In a little bit our foreheads will be marked with ashes, “a sign of our mortality and penitence,” and we will “remember that [we] are dust, and to dust [we] shall return.”

I don't want or need more ashes in my life. Do you? Most of us, I suspect, are already feeling burnt up or burned out. We've bumped against our limitations again and again. We know what it's like to be mortal and powerless. Mortality is our ever-present companion. Maybe this year we don't need another reminder of death. Maybe what we really need this year is a reminder to live more fully before we die and the promise that death does not have the final word.

I'm not suggesting that Lent and our rituals and practices don't have value or meaning; they absolutely do. What we do is important. I just don't want us to do Lent in the same old familiar, palliative, and comfortable way. Surely, Lent ought to change more than just the color of our vestments and altar hangings.

I don't want us to just get through Lent this year. I want Lent to get through to us. I don't want us to just do Lent this year. I want Lent to do us. I don't want Ash Wednesday to just be our descent into the ashes of our life. If it is not also a calling to rise from the ashes then it's incomplete and palliative.

Listen to this:

“You do not have to be good.
You do not have to walk on your knees
for a hundred miles through the desert, repenting.
You only have to let the soft animal of your body
love what it loves.”

How do you like that? What does it bring up for you? Those are the first few lines of Mary Oliver's poem "Wild Geese." What if that was our lenten journey this year?

"You do not have to be good."

I don't think anyone has ever said that to me? Have you ever been told that? I'm not against being good and I don't think Oliver is saying it's okay to be bad. I want to be good and I hope you do too. But maybe that's not the goal of Lent. What if Lent, the way of Jesus, and the gospel are about more than just being good? What if they are more about wholeness and life abundant? What if that's how we approached Lent this year? I wonder what that would offer us and what it would ask of us. I don't know where it would take us but we could spend the next forty days finding out.

"You do not have to walk on your knees for a hundred miles through the desert, repenting."

I wish I had known that when I was younger. Don't you? How many miles have you and I walked on our knees through the desert, repenting and trying to prove ourselves, gain approval, or be worthy?

It saves me from embarking on a lenten journey of self-punishment in hope of a divine reward. Is that really who we think God is or what God wants? That line cautions me not to devote forty days of my life to giving up something – anchovies, wine, dessert, social media, whatever – only to take back on Easter morning what I gave up. I risk changing my behavior but not my life.

"You only have to let the soft animal of your body love what it loves."

That's what I want for Lent. That's what I want for you and me. I want to discover "the soft animal of my body." It's that tender, instinctual, vulnerable, and deeply human part of me that loves. In today's gospel

([Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21](#)) Jesus calls that part the heart. Maybe Lent is a journey to discover, uncover, or recover our heart.

What is it that you and I are giving ourselves to? What do we really love? What are our treasures? And where are our hearts?

Jesus reminds us that one's heart and treasure cannot be separated. "For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also" (Matthew 6:21). The heart follows one's treasures. When I name my treasures then I will find my heart, that "soft animal" that loves.

That's when I have to face up to myself and, for better or worse, acknowledge the treasures I have given myself to and the direction in which they have taken my life. Sometimes I think it would be easier to be good, and less painful to "walk on [my] knees for a hundred miles through the desert, repenting." But I do not want to do Lent this year.

What are you treasuring and giving your heart to these days? Where is that taking your life?

Some treasures are of lasting and eternal value, others are not. Some are worth holding on to. Others I need to let go of regardless of how much I think I love or need them. They are fool's gold.

Learning to love and learning what to love, learning what to hold on to and what to let go of, that's the real work of Lent. That's when Lent gets through to me. That's when I stop doing Lent and Lent begins doing me. That's the holy Lent I want to observe. What about you?