

My Lenten Plan

By: Penny Holste

March 9, 2011. On this Ash Wednesday we are faced with seeing ourselves for who we really are. This is the ideal time to take action and remove whatever obstacles keep us from having strong faith and loving God. In her sermon this evening, Pastor Penny suggests a plan, a Lenten Plan, for making a promise and being faithful to it in these next 40 days.

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We begin in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

I never used to like (and still don't I guess) the way God was depicted in the Old Testament: a wrathful God so often. And you know some of those incidents. Maybe you remember that when Moses was on Mount Sinai getting the Ten Commandments, the children of Israel were down at the foot of the mountain, melting down their golden earrings to make a golden calf and to worship an idol. And God got so angry that he killed 3,000 of them in one split second. Or the many times that they began to worship idols and God allowed other countries to come in and conquer them, carry them away even as prisoners of war to Babylon. Or even when someone, another country, would oppress the children of Israel. God was so angry. These are the words that the prophet Isaiah attributes to God: "I trampled down peoples in my anger, I crushed them in my wrath, and I poured out their lifeblood on the earth."

There's an old sermon written in the 1600s by Jonathan Edwards called "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God." Maybe some of you had to read it for college English. It talks about God holding this sinner above the yawning mouth of hell, and that at any moment God could drop that sinner because that sinner deserves it. So it's that kind of thing that just drives me to say: that's not my God. You know, my God is the God of Jesus, and the forgiving God, and the loving God. That Old Testament God, that's not my God. And when you read the scholars, they help you to understand that a lot of those words are affected by the culture of the time, yes. But I've taken a class on the Book of Job, and some of us are hearing Dr. Ben Asen on Sunday mornings. And I think I've begun to understand that we need those words, we need to know that God is angry. Because unless we know that, we don't really know what sin is.

We are all sinners and we have a selfish outlook, and our standards are really not to be trusted. What we think of as normal, God thinks of as sin. Think, for instance, what God's intention was for this world: that everyone would have plenty to eat, that there would be no wars, that there would be no hostility, that people would feel loved and there would be good things for all. That was God's vision. And look what has happened. So our standards are really very low. When there are good things that happen, we make quite a lot of them. If there's a billionaire who gives a few million or maybe more than that to a needy country, we praise that person. And yet God expects all of us every day to be generous. Or if someone gives his or her life to save somebody else's life, we call that person a hero. And yet Jesus says love one another as I have loved you. And he gave his life. So our standards are really not to be trusted. We are so deeply entrenched in this selfishness we call sin that we really don't know sin. And we kid ourselves and think that we don't, most of the time.

That's what we heard about both in the Old Testament and in the gospel tonight. Back to Isaiah, God was angry because he said: you think you're worshipping me when you come and wear sackcloth and ashes, but at the same time all you think about is yourself. You oppress your workers. You raise the

wicked fist at each other. He said that's not worship. No, worship is when you release people from bondage, and you clothe the naked, and you give food to those who are hungry, and you find homes for those who are homeless. That's true worship. You are kidding yourselves. You are blind to sin.

Or what we heard in Matthew, in the New Testament, in the gospel. And Jesus is angry at the Pharisees. He says you think that you're really praising me by giving alms and praying, when all the while you're doing it for show. You just want the praise of people to say oh, those are such pious leaders we have. He said that's not worship, you're fooling yourselves. That's sin. And the sad thing is when we don't see our sin. We don't understand the cost of being forgiven and we don't understand the love of God.

A mother of a spoiled young man sent her son to a good college at quite a lot of expense to herself. And he was only there a few weeks when he called. He said, "Mom, I need a car." So she sold her car and got a an older one. She cashed in some savings, she gave up on a trip that she had been looking forward to and talking about a lot, and came up with the money and bought a car. And when he came home, he was so wrapped up in himself he didn't notice that she had an old car that she was driving. He hadn't really listened to her plans for a trip, so he didn't realize that she had given up on that. He didn't know, of course, that she had cashed in savings. So he did not really value the car. He took it to college. He didn't use it very well. He got in an accident and he ruined it. He didn't understand the gift and the value of it. But more importantly, he did not understand how much his mother loved him.

So it is Ash Wednesday. And tonight what we are faced with is to look deeply into ourselves and really admit that we're caught, that selfishness is what we're all about — to see ourselves for who we are. Because God, like that mother, took his wrath and turned it on himself, and gave up his most precious thing: his son. And now remember, we're talking about a triune God: Father, Son, Holy Spirit. One God. He gave himself. There is no difference between the Father and the Son in this case. He gave himself. He turned his anger, his rightful anger against us, back on himself. And it is only when we face our sin that we can understand the depth of his love for us. So tonight, that is our task. And the readings and the service will help us.

And I want to do one more thing. You'll find, in your bulletin, an envelope. And the ushers are ready to give more if you're sharing a bulletin. You should each have one. And it's called My Lenten Plan. We have 40 days — or really 47 I think, if you count the Sundays — ahead of us to Easter. This is the ideal time, once we have admitted our sin and once we have reminded ourselves of the depth of God's love, to take action and use these weeks to remove whatever obstacles keep us from having a strong faith, and keep us from loving God. So this is something you may choose to do. You may choose to decide to do something for Lent. If you don't pray everyday, this is the ideal time to make that your promise. If you don't read the Bible at home, this is the perfect time to find a time when you can read a little bit every day — maybe the Book of Matthew, which is what our gospels are based on. If there's someone who you've ignored and really needs your love, maybe this is the time to carve out a little bit of time in your schedule, whether it means taking something out you like to do that gives you more time to spend with this person. Or if there's a bad habit that's been an obstacle between you and God, this is the perfect time to work on that. So whatever it is that you promise to do, think of it as a method that will allow God to draw you close, something that will allow God to strengthen your faith and your love for him. After you've done that I'd like you to put it in the envelope, seal it, and write your own address here and put it in the offering plate. And in three weeks, middle of Lent, we'll mail it back to you. It can be kind of a check, kind of a way for you to keep faithful to your promise. Now, you may not want to do this or you may need more time. You certainly could bring this Sunday and put it in the offering plate. You may just want to think about it rather than write it down. But whatever it is that we choose to do in these next 40 days, may God bless us and draw us closer, in love and faith and joy.

Amen.

*** Keywords ***

2011, Christ Lutheran Church, Webster Groves, sermon, podcast, transcript, Pastor Penny Holste, Isaiah 58:1-12, Isaiah 63:6, Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21