

ASH WEDNESDAY, 2018

Psalm 51

*Behold, thou desirest truth in the inward being;
therefore teach me wisdom in my secret heart.
Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean;
wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.
Hide Your face from my sins,
and blot out all my iniquities.
Create in me a clean heart, O God,
and put a new and right spirit within me.
Cast me not away from thy presence,
and take not thy holy Spirit from me.
Restore to me the joy of thy salvation,
and uphold me with a willing spirit.*

Here in the verses of the Psalm for Ash Wednesday we have the goal of Lent: to create in us clean and honest hearts, to put a new and right spirit within us.

Things As They Are is a novel by Paul Horgan about a boy named Richard growing up in America during the first decades of the 20th Century. As the young boy tries – not always successfully – to make sense of life and find direction in an often confusing world, his mother one day says to him, “Richard, Richard, when will you learn to see things as they are?”

To see things as they are. That is the first step in living in truth. To see and name things as they are. To recognize our attempts at rationalizing or justifying our opinions and behavior when they are not true. To recognize when we are playing the victim instead of taking responsibility for our actions and the consequences of them.

Lent is an exercise in truth-telling. It is an exercise in learning to see things as they are. What are these basic life lessons that Lent seeks to instill in us? I’ll answer with a series of examples.

The first comes from one of the most calamitous events in European history: the plague known as the “Black Death” in the 14th Century. It killed as much as 60% of the population of Europe. The disease killed without regard to status, wealth, education, age, or any other condition. Part of the terror was, due to the primitive state of medicine at that

time, no one knew the cause of the disease or how really to treat it.

Victims sometimes developed a rash with rose-colored rings. Sweet-smelling posies were carried by those who tended the sick in order to mask the stench of the disease or to cleanse the bad air that many thought transmitted the illness. Because so many died, the bodies were burned in mass cremations in an effort to stop the spread of the plague. Legend has it the grim reality of that time gave rise to a nursery rhyme we all know:

*Ring around the rosie,
A pocket full of posies,
Ashes, ashes
We all fall down*

Whether the legend is true or not, its conclusion is. We all fall down, dead. There is a relentless grittiness to Lent, a severe bluntness about our existence. We are reminded today, with the ashes imposed on our foreheads. Sooner or later, we all fall down. “Remember you are dust, and to dust you shall return.”

And Lent concludes with an ever greater gritty ending: Jesus’ falling down into death by being lifted up on a cruel state-imposed execution, the cross. Lent, thus, is a season that the popular preachers and purveyors of human potential, of positive thinking, or possibility thinking, and the latest deceit, prosperity thinking, prefer to ignore. We are conditioned to believe in optimism, good times, winning, and the denial of mortality. But the truth cannot be denied: We all will fall down in death. Lesson one in learning to see things as they are.

Lesson number two. A few years ago a pastor-friend of mine told this funny story to his friends on Facebook:

One of my church council members called me the day after Ash Wednesday. She was laughing hysterically. She said a co-worker came to her and asked, “Is there something wrong with your pastor? I saw him yesterday at the grocery store. There was this ter-

rible black mark on his forehead. Is your pastor very sick? Will he get well?

I posted in reply: Yes! He is sick indeed! It is the same sickness we all have got: Sin. Caught it from some folks named Adam and Eve. And there is a cure, which I will get to in a minute.

The story points to the second truth about seeing things as they are: confessing our sin. Not a popular or “hip” thing in our time (or any time, for that matter). Deep down, we all know that our lives are not what they should be. As we confess, we are in bondage to sin and cannot free ourselves.

So, Lent is about getting a healthy heart, purifying your heart, so that you can indeed do what the old favorite hymn sings: more closely walk with God. God wants your heart. God wants to be the source of all good in your life, the basis and goal of your actions, the true object of your affections. This is the purpose of the coming forty days: to set our hearts right. It begins with confessing our sin, to do a spring cleaning of our souls so we can fight the good fight of faith against sin, evil, and death.

And there is, as I said, a cure: the grace and love of God in Jesus Christ. Lesson three in seeing things as they are. So here is the invitation of Lent, which we will sing each Sunday for the next six weeks: Return to the Lord your God, for He is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love. If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. But if we confess our sins, God who is faithful and just will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. What could be more simple, more honest, more direct than that?

It is an interesting coincidence that Lent begins on St. Valentine’s Day this year. It is a rare coincidence: the last time it happened was 1945 (the next will be a shorter wait: 2024). It makes for an interesting reflection on the story of St. Valentine and the meaning of Ash Wednesday.

St. Valentine was a real person. He lived in the third century in Rome. He was martyred for his witness as a Christian in AD 269. Legend has it he was put into prison first. While awaiting trial he

would smuggle out letters to people assuring them he was alright and encouraging them in faith. Often these letters were in the shape of – you guessed it – a heart.

And so today Ash Wednesday falls on St. Valentine’s Day. One could call it the greatest valentine ever, because it is the greatest love story ever told: God so loved the world that He gave His only Son, in order that whoever believes in Him might have eternal life.

Cardinal John Henry Neumann lived in England 200 years ago. He had inscribed on his tombstone the phrase, “From shadows and phantasms into truth.” That is the journey of Lent, of the whole Christian life. It is a journey of learning to see things as they are, a journey to the truth and living in truth. From the worship of false gods to the true God and Lord of all. From self-deception and self-justification to truth. From living for oneself to living for others, from a heart turned inward in self-centeredness to a heart turned outward in generosity, reflecting to others the love God has shown us.

See how God invites you to this in so many ways. Behold the Son of God, Jesus, whom God put forward to suffer and die on account of and for your sins. Be not afraid to confess your sins. Open your heart to God, that He may set even your most secret sins in the light of his kindly countenance, give you peace, and create a new and right spirit within you – a spirit ready and willing to serve the Lord and walk in His ways. Come back to your Baptism, to bathe in the forgiving, cleansing water of God’s love. Welcome to the Table of the Lord, the table of reconciliation with God and each other. Come and receive the gift of God for the people of God, the greatest valentine ever. Come now, for today is as St. Paul says, the right and acceptable time. Amen.

Neuman – journey of life