

John Sampson

“The Pilgrimage of Lent”

Text: Joel 2:1 – 2, 12 – 17; Matthew 6:1 – 6, 16 – 21

Preached at KVCC

February 14, 2018 – Ash Wednesday

Will you pray with me?

God, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable to you our rock and our redeemer.

Amen.

Tonight, on this evening of Ash Wednesday, we start a pilgrimage. It is a pilgrimage in that it is a sacred journey, a journey that asks for our transformation, and a deepening of our relationship with God, and with one another.

It is a journey in which we travel with Jesus towards Jerusalem, and towards the cross. But that is not where this journey will end. Our

shared path with Jesus will continue into the glory of Easter, and all the way to the fires of Pentecost. It is a story that is so big, and so complex, and so subtle that it literally takes a quarter of the year to share together.

We take our first step today, on this wintery February day, and we complete our journey in the warmth of spring, at the end of May.

This pilgrimage takes us through the calendar, but it also takes us deep within ourselves.

It will ask us to travel to places within our own hearts, and within the heart of the human experience, which will shake us to our foundations, and put into question the most basic assumptions we carry about ourselves, about our faith, about each other, and about the possibilities of the future.

This journey will hold up a mirror to our lives, and we may not like what we see staring back at us.

So we begin this path in ashes, in a symbol of our own mortality, but also by marking ourselves with a sign of the mortality of our own morality. We mark ourselves acknowledging how we fail in our love for one another, in our compassion to ourselves, and in our commitment to living into God's dream for all her children.

But ashes are not the end of the story. They are just the beginning.

Our story is also a story of hope beyond all hope, of redemption, and of forgiveness. It is a story that starts in the cold death of winter, and moves towards the new life of spring's renewal.

It is a journey that starts in the cold death of our own apathy and selfishness, and moves towards the new life of relationship and generosity of heart, which is our renewal.

But this pilgrimage, this journey of transformation, doesn't just happen. It is the product of our own commitment to change, and our desire for the future to be something different from the past.

The writers of Matthew lay out the technologies of growth before us, the spiritual tools that can help us realize transformation within our hearts and lives. They're tools we've heard of before, and maybe even use today: alms, prayer and fasting. And although they differ from each other in form, I think they are all connected in intent. They invite us to look beyond ourselves, so that we may openly connect with the other, whether that is our neighbor, or Jesus, or God.

If you were to pick up a tool of transformation on this Ash
Wednesday what would you choose?

What technology of spirit would you take up during the pilgrimage
that begins today, which will help you move outside of yourself and
engage more deeply and profoundly with the other, on their own
terms?

Would it be alms, or prayer, or fasting? Or would it be something
completely different?

Or if you find yourself unable to take up some kind of tool or
discipline of change this day, why would that be? Is there something
that stops you from doing so?

I once heard the actions of Jesus' final days, of his final journey to
Jerusalem and of his Passion, referred to as his Great Work. That

phrase has always stuck with me. It seems paradoxical to be undertaking one's most meaningful and impactful actions as one's mission and calling is collapsing.

Yet as we take up the disciplines, which soften our egos, and our focus on ourselves, as we can commit to the tools that will create a space for one another in our hearts, can't we call this the great work? Aren't the ways we fast during Lent precisely the paths that will open up for ourselves, and our world, the possibility of new life and forgiveness that are the foundations of our Easter story? Aren't these technologies of spirit the methods that will allow us to return from the pilgrimage of Lent and Easter and Pentecost as new people more open to one another, and more open and sensitive to God's presence in our lives?

I think the answer to each of these questions is "Yes!"

And so we take our first steps today.

We take our first steps on a journey of the heart, which will test us, and challenge us, and which will also reward us with unimaginable beauty and hope.

May our journey be blessed with insight, with transformation, with courage, and with camaraderie.

And may it end not at the cross, but I pray that our travels will continue on to the birth of new life within each of our hearts and souls.

Amen.