

It's not always easy – being a Christian.

Oh, **when** we need to **call upon God for help**, it's easier to stay in touch. **But, even then**, some folks feel that they've not been good enough all along; and they don't deserve to be able to ask God for help.

**S-A-T-A-N**. The **great accuser**. Satan is always trying to get to us – to **separate us from God** – and one of his favorite tools is **ACCUSATION**. And Satan always works hardest whenever we are getting closest to God.

**I know that sometimes when people talk about Satan, some of us get uncomfortable.**

- It's too "story book."
- It's too much like Flip Wilson: "The Devil made me do it."
- To portray Satan as a red creature with forked tail and pitchfork makes him too laughable.
- **BUT** to think that Satan is not real **IS TO MAKE A TERRIBLE MISTAKE**.

The apostle Paul wrote the Church in Ephesus and told them that struggle here during life is not against enemies of flesh and blood, but is against "spiritual forces of evil...." (Ephesians 6:12)

The season of Lent (this 40 days) is a remembrance of the 40 days Jesus spent in the wilderness doing battle with what? With Satan.

Because Jesus was a human, like us, He too had to deal with Satan. Unlike the usual way we think of Satan – as the Tempter, he appeared to Jesus as an ACCUSER. ***If you're the Son of God, then do this; do that.***

The **things** Satan was trying to lure Jesus into doing – things like feeding the poor and miraculously healing the sick were **NOT BAD** things; they were indeed things that Jesus did.

The **problem** was the **motivation**.

The problem was that Satan wanted Jesus to do these things **in order to prove that He was indeed good enough**. **So many people today are still falling into that trap. God help us!**

- It was all about a condition of the heart.
- And for us, it's also all about a condition of the heart.

As we begin this holy season of reflection and preparation, I invite you to do those things that will prepare your heart.

**You are good enough – just as you are – for God to love you. There's nothing you can do to make God love you any more. Period.**

All of Satan's work on Jesus in the wilderness was designed to undercut what God said at Jesus' Baptism: **This is my beloved child, with Whom I am well pleased.**

We need to understand that. And, more, we need to be able to accept that down in the very depths of our heart. **There's nothing we can do to make God love us any more.**

**It is a Gift.** And it is the Gift signified in our **Baptism**, as it was announced in Jesus' Baptism.

So **WHY**, you ask, would we want to go through some **GIVING UP** something in Lent? What's the connection?

It's one of the strange ways we humans work. **All that we have is a GIFT.** And yet, we go through life, **so much of the time thinking** that all we have **is what we have earned**; therefore we must be entitled to do with it whatever we want.

It's when we **GIVE UP** some of these things, that we are able to see – **no, not SEE, but understand in our heart** – just what these things really are.

If I give up something, as my way of **GIVING** to God – not giving the **THING TO GOD**, but giving of **MYSELF** to God -- I am able to realize in my heart the meaning of God's Gift to me.

In giving up something for God, during this season of Lent, I begin to realize – in ways that don't fit into **LOGICAL THINKING OF THE HEAD**, but

instead in ASSURANCE THAT IS BORN IN THE HEART – just how much all that I have is not my own – how ALL OF IT is a Gift.

**Every single one of us here today/tonight is going to die.** We all know that – in our heads. But because DEATH is such a fearful thing in the heart, we pretty much leave it to head knowledge, until we HAVE to deal with it in our HEARTS.

Today/Tonight, as you receive **these ashes**, it's a **HEART REMINDER** of the fact that **we are going to die**.

We **need** to **feed our hearts**.

We **need** to **nourish our hearts**.

And we **need** to **come to terms with the fact** that all of the **STUFF we own and seek after** is eventually going to be gone – our bodies, our physical security, our comforts.

- All Gone.
- And we will be left with what?
- For all eternity.

It's indeed an amazing thing, how good we are at making excuses to justify what we do – to avoid having to deal with the cold, hard reality of life, death, eternity.

And the Church has given us this wonderful season – this time called Lent – where we are reminded **HOW** we can allow God to nourish and nurture our HEARTS.

**None of us can stand in judgment of anyone else. Because none of us knows what is going on in anyone else's heart. Because none of us knows fully the story out of which each person works.**

God wants us – each one of us – to share all eternity with Him. But in order to do that, we have to learn to accept it as a Gift – a Gift that when received takes over our lives completely.

Before we can accept the Gift, we have to get over the notion of ownership.

And, during Lent, beginning with the Ashes of the Certainty of our Death, we are invited to practice letting go –

- letting go of our cash,
- letting go of the notion that we can provide SECURITY for ourselves
- letting go of the notion that we can buy things that will provide real happiness
- letting go of our sense of control,
- letting go of our sense of entitlement,
- letting go even of our sense of virtue,
- letting go.

And letting God give us

And letting God own us

And letting God ...

It IS very personal.

It's between each one of us and God.

And it is hard to do.

That's why we are invited to do it together.

I can't receive salvation on your behalf, nor you on behalf of me. You have to receive the Gift yourself, as do I.

But we can work out our salvation with fear and trembling TOGETHER –

- encouraging one another;

- praying for one another;
- holding one another accountable in love;
- looking out for one another.

As you come receive your ashes – we are going to do it differently than before. Before, we came to the kneeling rail en group. Today I ask that you come in two lines – one line to Janet, one line to me.

When it is your turn, I invite you to close your eyes and try to imagine how it be when you pass through the doorway called death. THIS is how each of us will receive the final installment of the Gift of Eternal Life.

Yes, I invite you to do that – eyes closed, privately, alone – for dying is ultimately a VERY PRIVATE act – regardless of who may be around us at the time.

But know also, as you come, that we are doing this Ash Wednesday and Lent together. Because we are the CHURCH.

As each person comes to receive, and then may kneel at the altar in prayer afterwards, I want everyone else here to pray for that person. And then you will pray for the next person as they come. And, know, that as you come, the prayers of all of your brothers and sisters will also be lifted up for you as well.

**IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.**