

Pastor Courtney Steitz

Ash Wednesday: 2/17/2021

As we begin this season of Lent, I can't get out of my head that in Lent one year ago the pandemic reached the United States and we experienced lockdowns and social distancing and masks. And honestly, since then, it has felt like a whole year of Lent, at least to me. I remember last year another pastor remarked "this is the Lent-iest Lent I have ever Lented." And this sentiment seems to have carried over into the rest of the year. Haven't we had enough hard events and grief this year, do we really need Lent again?

Because even in our Gospel reading for this Ash Wednesday, Jesus seems pretty clear about what we can expect. Luke writes that Jesus has set his face toward Jerusalem. Luke means that Jesus has shifted his focus and intention towards the holy city, Jesus is heading to Jerusalem, towards the triumphal entry, and ultimately to the cross. Jesus knows exactly where he is headed and is preparing himself and his disciples for what is to come. This is a heavy reality for Jesus to carry—even if his disciples haven't figured it out yet.

For Jesus this pretty much leads to rejection. The Samaritans aren't interested in hearing him or receiving him anymore because he is headed to Jerusalem. Because they worship differently, Jesus heading to Jerusalem is enough for them to write him off completely. When the disciples are upset and want to call down fire, Jesus rebukes them. He doesn't even seem surprised by the rejection. Jesus knows that the road to the cross will be marked by rejection not just from Samaritans but by the Jews and even by the disciples themselves.

The example of the rejection from the Samaritans should have been enough of a clue for the followers of Jesus that not everything was going to be cool breezes and smooth sailing. But instead, more people come to Jesus asking if they can follow him. When Jesus responds with the realities of what it means to follow Jesus to Jerusalem, to follow Jesus to the cross, they all of a sudden seem a little more hesitant. "Oh wait... let me go and take care of one more thing..." Jesus' response may seem harsh, but he knows where the path of discipleship leads and he doesn't want his potential followers to be caught by surprise.

And that is often where we find ourselves each Lent. Following Jesus' journey to the cross for our sakes, for the sake of the whole world. We watch and wonder if we're really cut out for it. Maybe we want to follow, but like those in our Gospel reading, are

constantly reminded of another thing that stands in our way of following Jesus into kingdom Life.

Just like Jesus isn't surprised by the rejection of the Samaritans, Jesus isn't surprised by the ways that sin keeps us from following. Jesus isn't surprised that we aren't capable of following his journey to Jerusalem and the cross. We fall short, we mess up, we sin. We choose the easy way out instead of the right way. We close our eyes to the ugliness of injustice because it is inconvenient or it feels too complicated. We wander after other things, certain that they will bring contentment or happiness and neglect God and God's faithfulness. Sin takes many forms, but it always leads us off the path of justice, shalom and wholeness.

But as we stand at the beginning of this Lenten season, Ash Wednesday marks the beginning of Lent 2021 when for many of us it feels like Lent 2020 never ended, we are also reminded that Jesus is not just on a journey to the cross, but also to the resurrection. As Christians, we already know the end of the story. For the sake of the world and all creation, Jesus embraces death on the cross and is raised to new life in the resurrection. There is hope at the end of this road that Jesus walks. Sin does not get the last word.

And praise God for that! We have learned in the last year that sin and brokenness and death are so much bigger than any individual choice that you and I might make. Sin impacts all of creation; sin and death lead to systemic injustice, to global pandemics, to poverty and inequality. Lent is an opportunity to be reminded of all the ways that we fall short and all of the ways that sin has impacted our world. Because as we remember the depth of the power that sin has on our world, we are left even more in awe of Jesus' journey to the cross and his resurrection.

We don't focus on sin and repentance and brokenness during Lent just to make ourselves feel sad or guilty, but because it reminds us of the greatness of God, the expansiveness of God's mercy, and the depth of God's love. Yes, this Lent we will still be invited to spend time in prayer, to be reminded of the consequences of sin, to seek confession and forgiveness. But this year especially, I feel like we could all do with a word of hope. The promised resurrection after the cross, life after death, compassion after judgement, forgiveness after confession, wholeness after sin. A pastor friend recently reminded me of an early church father who said that confession is not about looking down on ourselves, but on lifting our eyes to God. So as we travel this holy season of lent, let us not lose sight of the God we are following. When the world around us still seems marked by loss and grief let us keep following Jesus on the road to the cross, because it also leads to resurrection.

Amen.