



ALL SAINTS CHURCH

PASADENA, CALIFORNIA

**The Vitality In A Broken Heart**

A Homily by the Rev. J. Edwin Bacon, Jr.

February 17, 2010 - Ash Wednesday

Ash Wednesday is the day in the Christian liturgical calendar which takes you and me to the desert with Jesus and begins our forty day transformational journey with him. This holy season of Lent each year is a Seminar of the Spirit in which the very same Spirit that accompanied Jesus in his desert experience is accompanying you and me in our desert experience.

Let me share three thoughts I'm pondering about the 40 days of Lent this year.

One thought has to do with having a compassionate Lent this year. Many of us have been reading Karen Armstrong's writings about compassion. She says that the great Rabbi Meir said that any interpretation of scripture which led to hatred or contempt of other people -- any people whatsoever -- was illegitimate. Saint Augustine made exactly the same point. Scripture, he says, "teaches nothing but charity, and we must not leave an interpretation of scripture until we have found a compassionate interpretation of it." (Karen Armstrong, TED lecture, [http://www.ted.com/index.php/talks/karen\\_armstrong\\_makes\\_her\\_ted\\_prize\\_wish\\_the\\_charter\\_f\\_or\\_compassion.html](http://www.ted.com/index.php/talks/karen_armstrong_makes_her_ted_prize_wish_the_charter_f_or_compassion.html))

I believe that the same principle applies to the church's liturgical seasons. If you and I enter into this season of Lent with attitudes or practices that do not lead us to compassion we will have an experience of Lent that leads us away from the experience Jesus had in the desert. That is what Isaiah means in the first lesson tonight. If our fasting during Lent – literally or symbolically – serves injustice toward others, it is not the kind of fasting that God calls for. Rather, sacred fasting is always about freedom from oppression – economic oppression, the oppression of discrimination, and oppression that comes from fear-based and thus violence-based religion which always ends up abusing the human spirit.

The sign for me of a compassionate Lent and a compassionate spirituality and religion is whether or not it makes us free of oppression and injustice.

A second thought has to do with the centrality of HEART during Lent. Lent is about accessing the state of our heart and improving the state of our heart. Lent is the season of the heart. It's right there in the opening prayer – "Create and make in us new and contrite hearts." Jesus says in today's gospel, "Wherever your treasure is, there will your heart be also." While we have the ashes imposed on our foreheads tonight, Psalm 51 will be sung. The closing sentence in that poem is, "A broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise."

Now, if you and I are practicing a compassionate Lent rather than a punitive Lent, we will know that the brokenness of heart that Lent calls for is not a heart that is broken down, but a heart that is broken open.

Rabbi Yehuda Fine has written about a horrible head-on collision he suffered that shattered his pelvis into nine pieces. He wrote that as a driven professional man he had to learn that he would not heal unless he lived fully in the present. He said he had to learn that, "**A broken heart is not the same as sadness. Sadness occurs when the heart is stone cold and lifeless. On the contrary, there is an unbelievable amount of vitality in a broken heart...**" (Lesser, Elizabeth, *Broken Open; How Difficult Times Make Us Grow*, pp. 89)

The most vital people I know are those whose hearts are open to being moved, to seeing God in others, and who know how to be open to the sacred in every moment of life.

Finally, I want to share a quotation from a book of poetry my wife gave me for my birthday. In part it reads, "the ultimate gauge of the success of a poem is whether it puts "golden tools" into our hands that can help excavate the Beloved whom we and society have buried so deep inside?" (Ladinsky, Daniel, translations by, *The Gift: Poems by Hafiz, the Great Sufi Master*)

When the great psychotherapist, Victor Frankl was released from the Nazi concentration camps where he lost his beloved wife and all his family, he said that he learned that that desert experience taught him that "it did not really matter what we expected from life, but rather what life expected from us."

We believe that just before Jesus was driven into the desert Jesus heard God say to him, "This is my Beloved." And our participation in that baptism means that God has said that to everyone of us. "This is my Beloved." The Beloved is inside each of us -- so often buried by ourselves and by society. Lent is the season to excavate the Beloved from inside ourselves and from other people and ask the question, "What does the Beloved expect from us?"

The rabbi whose body was broken and learned the vitality of a broken heart wrote that one of his favorite rabbis wrote, "Sometimes we have to sift through the ashes to find a single spark." As we now have ashes imposed on our foreheads, may they be a sign to us to sift through them and excavate through them this Lent to find the Beloved, to find the spark, to find our soul and listen to it tell us what life expects from us.

Amen