Journeying Closer to God
Isaiah 58:1-12; Luke 18:9-14

"What we have most in common is not religion but humanity. I learned this from my religion, which also teaches me that encountering another human being is as close to God as I may ever get-in the eye-to-eye thing, the person-to-person thing which is where God's Beloved has promised to show up**….The point is to see the person standing right in front of me**, who has no substitute, who can never be replaced, whose heart holds things for which there is no language, whose life is an unsolved mystery." [1] These are the words of Barbara Brown-Taylor from her book "An Altar **in the World…" She beautifully captures** in words that our lives are a gift and it is in living with one another that we have an opportunity to glimpse the **Divine. Life, our existence, is truly a part** of a Holy Mystery.

Tonight we enter into the journey of Lent. The word actually means springtime. For our **Christian calendar this is a 40 day journey**, not including Sundays, beginning Ash Wednesday to Easter Sunday. It is to be a time of penitence or regretting the wrongdoings we have done, fasting, almsgiving, and prayer. We are called **during this season to balance those things that we chose to** give up with giving to those in need.

"We begin the **journey with this unusual worship service** that we call Ash Wednesday, referring to the ashes that will mark our foreheads in the shape of the cross, ashes made from the **burning of the palm branches from Palm** Sunday last year. [The holy mystery here is found in the mystery of Spirit. We find the Holy Spirit able to bring life even from lifeless ashes. It is from dust that we have come and it is to dust we shall return.] **Tonight we are invited to take a long look at** our lives, how we live and how we move in this world. We are invited to examine our actions toward **God and toward others. In this, we** also are invited to confess where we have failed God and to ask for God's mercy that we might be restored into right relationship not only with God, but also with

[1] Barbara Brown Taylor. "An Altar in the World: A Geography of Faith" p. 102

others, the people with whom we live and work and share our faith community. This is, perhaps, our hardest journey."[2]

There are two beliefs about how we are to respond to this time of Lent. One is that this should be a sorrowful time in which we grieve our **failings as the children of God. Another is that "we** ought to approach this night and the journey of Lent as an opportunity to be the church's springtime, a time when, out of the darkness of sin's winter, a repentant, empowered people emerges."[3] I believe **that it can be both. A time of grieving**, but also a time of emerging anew in the love, grace, and forgiveness found in God.

Lent is a time for us to reflect upon **what it means to be a baptized body of believers.** To be baptized into Christ and in the name of Christ is to live the life that Jesus taught us to live. He taught **us that we are to have no other God other than** our Creator and that we are to "love one another." What does that look like?

During this time of Lent let us seek to journey closer to the one true God. That means being intentional about casting aside the gods of **worry, fear, division, hatred, the gods of never ending** work, TV, video games, and all the busyness that claims our time and attention from prayer, listening **for and to the still speaking voice of God,** scripture reading, and from seeing the Divine not only in one another but also in all the rest of creation. Barbara Brown Taylor asks these questions: "Do we build God a house so that we can choose when **to go see God? Do we build God a house in lieu of** having God stay at ours? ...What happens to the riverbanks, the mountaintops, the deserts, and the trees? **What happens to the people who never show up** in our houses of God?"[4] My sisters and brothers of Peace, during this time of Lent, let us seek to once again live to serve the One who created all that is. Knowing that our lives are to be a reflection of our faith and a reflection of God's love, compassion, and call to those who have never entered a **church. This spring season is a time in which our faith**

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[2] Rev. Jo Hudson, "The Passion of Jesus" sermon. Ash Wednesday, Feb. 25, 2009 @ Cathedral of Hope, Dallas, TX
[3] Bread and Wine: Readings for Lent and Easter, Orbis Books, 2006
[4] Barbara Brown Taylor, p. 9

journey and our faith can bloom in the presence and power of God. This is a time for us to "pray **without ceasing, giving thanks in all or our circumstances"** to the One who has promised never to leave us. (1 Thess. 5:17-18)

God has promised to never leave us and it is God who has granted us free will. We must make the choice to seek to grow, seek to bloom, and seek to live not just for ourselves but for the greater good of our community. In seeking to **be God's kin-dom builders here on earth we journey closer** to one another and closer to God. That looks like what the prophet Isaiah describes in our reading this evening. The passages from Isaiah as found in the Inclusive Language Bible reads: "[6]This is the sort **of fast [or living] that pleases me [says YHWH]: Remove** the chains of injustice! Undo the ropes of the yoke [or bondage.] Let those who are oppressed go free, and break every yoke you encounter! [7] Share your bread with those who are hungry, and shelter homeless poor people! Clothe those who are naked and don't hide from the needs of your own flesh and blood!" (Isa. 58:6-7)

Here we see vividly the work of Jesus **and the work that we have been commissioned to do** as followers of Christ. We are to pray, but we are not to be passively sitting and waiting for God to magically meet the needs of our world. We are to be like Jesus, active and engaged in the change we **seek. We are to be a voice for the voiceless, we are** to care about the people of Darfur as much as we care about the people of Stevens Point, we are to be politically and socially active just as Jesus was, we are to care about healthcare for all people. No one should not be dying in this country or **have to declare bankruptcy because they do not have healthcare.** We are to care about education for all children not just those who live in the right neighborhoods. We are to care about climate change and our impact on the **environment. Jesus was concerned about our lives in God's life** and our world in God's care.[5] How are you living your life like Jesus?

Many people choose to give up something for Lent as Jesus prepared during these forty days to **give up his life. Again, as Isaiah instructs us, that is** useless unless it is to the benefit and glory of

[5] Rev. Jo Hudson, Ibid

God. If you are giving up chocolate or Starbucks then use the money you would have spent on those things to give to Our Church's Wider **Mission or the local humane society. If you are denying** yourself your favorite television program, then use that time to be in prayer not only for your own life, **but for the world around us. Or use the time to write or** phone your local representative and give voice to issues that affect the poor, the working class, those who remained oppressed in our society like **our gay, lesbian, and transgender sisters and brothers who seek the right** to marry. Be a voice for environmental concerns. Use your time in prayer and in service. If you are giving up drinking sodas then let it be because you realize that your body is a temple and we are to care for the temple that God has given us if it is **going to function in service to God's mission. Again,** Lent is not simply about letting go. Remember the word Lent means springtime. This is a time for growing anew and more beautiful in our journey with God and all of God's creation.

Some people take up new spiritual **disciplines during this time as well. For some it is** praying in lectio divina, for others it is incorporating prayer beads, still for others it is creating an altar **in their home or even their work space so that there** is a tangible reminder to center and focus on God. This is a time of focusing on our relationship with God and with others.

Tonight as we begin this Lenten journey closer to God, let us seek to take a good hard look at our lives and how we live in relationship **to God and others, considering the impact our living** has on the world. "What we have most in common is not religion but humanity." To say that we are the body of Christ means that we are committed to participating in the life of Jesus the Christ seeking to be **transformed personally and in turn to transform** the world around us. "Jesus told his followers, "You are the light of the world, you are the salt of the earth." So, let us be that. Let us be light and be salt. What we may well discover is **that to be light and salt is the way of Jesus, the way of life, the way of life abundant."[6] Amen**

[6] Ibid