

Ash Wednesday.2017
Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21
The Rev. Melanie McCarley

In general, I think of myself as a “head down, get through it” type of person. I “get through” things: events such as Annual Meetings, Bishop’s Visitations, Diocesan Conventions and the like. On a day of Confession...hear this. I don’t relish these experiences. I endure them. Here’s the problem. Approach too many things from this vantage point: tests in school, presentations at work, visits from the in-laws, the ever earlier arrival of Christmas displays in stores, snowstorms, and the corresponding season of mud, the inevitable humidity of summer and 90 degree days and pretty soon, what you’re doing is enduring life, rather than living it. You’re getting through.

If you hear nothing else during this Ash Wednesday meditation—then hear this: The goal of Lent is *not* to get through it. The goal is not to endure this holy season, but to engage it, to live into Lent in the hope of creating in ourselves, with the help of God, a holy place for resurrection.

I see too many people approaching Lent the way some of us approach exercise—“Why do you do it?” Asks one person? “Because it feels so good when I stop.” Responds the other. Really? Can’t we do better? And if we can—wouldn’t this change our entire approach to this holy season? We engage Lent for much the same reason that we exercise—because it makes us stronger, healthier, more flexible, better able to withstand the challenges of life when they come our way, and, perhaps most importantly, more fully able to enjoy the blessings this life has to offer us as well. Living well, rather than enduring is the reason for this season.

Listen to a portion of the Old Testament lesson for today from the prophet Isaiah who calls the people of Israel to a time of repentance. He says: *“The Lord will guide you continually, and satisfy your needs in parched places, and make your bones strong; and you shall be like a watered garden, like a spring of water, whose waters never fail. Your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt; you shall raise up the foundations of many generations; you shall be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of streets to live in.”* So, the ultimate goal of repentance is not to endure for the simple reason that we might avoid the wrath of God, the goal is to repent so that we might live. Life—ultimately, is the gift repentance and of this Lenten season as well. The reward is not endurance; it’s not “getting through”. The reward is life. And not simply life for us—but life for everyone—for all the people of God.

With this in mind, consider how your approach to this holy season might change. Instead of suffering through the season so the pain might end come Easter, choose, this year, a different approach. Give something up that is causing you pain. Leave behind gossip, envy, finger-pointing, cynicism, sarcasm or disengagement, and take something on instead: Reading the Bible, planning a Garden to plant in the spring, calling friends and relatives you haven't spoken to for a while, volunteering at the Dedham Food Pantry, Worshipping at the Thursday Morning Eucharist, engaging in the lost art of writing letters. Whatever you do with your Lent, make it more about bringing your heart in line with the kingdom of God rather than giving up something simply for the sake of giving something up. Do your best to see your Lenten discipline as a means of growing closer to God, and in doing this, working to craft a better way of life.

In a Eucharistic prayer found in the Roman Missal these words are addressed to God: "Each year (O Lord) you give us this joyful season when we prepare to celebrate the paschal mystery with mind and heart renewed." So, renewal, rather than endurance is the goal of this holy time of year. Think of it this way, "getting through" is not the aim—rather, Easter is the goal—not simply one day of rejoicing—but a life-time of living well in the presence of God. Now, if that's not a reason for engaging Lent, I don't know what is. In Jesus' name. *Amen.*