

## Pastor Roy's Sermon from February 26, 2012

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Welcome to Lent! Lent is an invitation, not a command or a demand. A chance to focus. To focus on something of the Spirit—something that you believe is important. Something that calls you into a greater fullness and richness. A stronger relationship that increases the life in you. Joy. Peace. Hope.

In the early church, lent was the final preparation for new members to be received into full fellowship during the vigil of the resurrection of our Lord. Lent was also a time of repentance for those who wished to return to God, to recommit themselves to the Way of Jesus Christ. Now Lent is a discipline which we can all apply to our lives.

Lent comes along every year to pick up the pieces. Its not that we're going to figure out how to get it right—to succeed. No, lent comes along reminding us all that spiritual ground is level ground. We're all equal. We all need grace. We all *need* to show grace. We need to be loved, not because we deserve it. Quite the opposite, anyone who knows us well, knows that we are certainly not innocent. Sometimes we are just not lovable people—Right? Ultimately, we can only be loved by those who can forgive. We work so hard to put on a good face—to keep our faces clean—without blemish. We put on smiles and hold a countenance which tells everyone that we know what we're doing and we're ok. Again, quite opposite, we often don't know what we're doing, and we often feel not the slightest bit ok.

That's one reason Ash Wednesday is such an honest truth telling gesture. For a few hours we walk around with ash/dust on our foreheads. If we go in the presence of undusted people, they will stare at the smudge on our forehead. “Do I say something about that or not?” Then we *surely* must tell them that its Ash Wednesday, and no, of course, my face is not *really* dirty. That palm ash was placed on purpose as a spiritual discipline. Ultimately, we end up wiping off the ash because we just don't feel comfortable even with intentional dirt on our faces. I guess it just hits too close to home sometimes. This symbol of our dustiness. We have to depend on grace because we cannot pull it all off all by ourselves. We need God and we need one another.

Think about the palm ashes. Those branches which we waved to praise our Lord almost a year ago came full circle to show us our true nature. The palms are like a compass. They show us who is Lord and who needs help. Jesus is Lord and we need help.

Now, we can spend the rest of our lives trying to cover this up, or we can truly and honestly, humbly confess it and move on in our growing freedom.

True spirituality is honest. Finding ourselves not in facades and pretending but fully in God. Our instincts tell us that it all depends on you and me. But the Scriptures and the wisdom of the ages tells us otherwise. It all begins and ends with God. We take part in the dance, but its not about us. Its about the mystery of God, creation, and us.

We are part of something much greater than the cells of our individual bodies. Much greater than our accomplishments—however impressive they may be. They are dust, as are we. The sooner we accept that, the more healthy and authentic we will be. No longer needing to pretend we are something that clearly we are not. Giving up the constant drive to compare ourselves to others and impress—we fall into freedom.

Lent is trying to teach us to let go of our desire to achieve. To find ourselves instead in God's eternal goodness.

Lent is only the beginning because it takes a long time to learn the freedom of God's love and mercy. Its almost like trying to teach water to run uphill. We so desperately need grace...and we so desperately resist it.

So in prayer we learn to come back together as God's children. We pray not to get our way, but to redirect ourselves toward God, God's people, and all of creation. Lent is prayer. And the prayer must be without ceasing because we forget so easily and begin competing again with those we were created to love and serve.

Jesus is thrown into the desert, surrounded by wild, animals and an enemy which at least partly was the natural limitations of his own humanity. Jesus was totally one of us. He struggled as we do to listen amidst distractions and weariness. He overcame, not based on his own strength, but on resting in God's strength, in finding freedom to love as God loves.

The wilderness was tough on Jesus. But in it he learned to trust.

We learn in the wilderness too. Sometimes Lent is a wilderness, sometimes we are thrown very painfully into our own wildernesses. Either way, the angels are with us and enough friends if we open ourselves to their mercy. If we take the time to listen and wait, we come to learn that God is with us, that we are not alone in the desert.

In this season of Lent, seek God, seek friends who will listen. Let us wait and learn this freedom.

Join us on Wednesday nights as we break bread together and worship and remember the freedom of God's mercy.

Amen.