

## Ash Wednesday, 2017.

I am firmly of the opinion that the liturgy does the heavy-lifting tonight. The invitation to a holy Lent, the litany of penitence, the imposition of ashes, and finally the Eucharist do what we most need done. We enter this season with the words of the church ringing in our ears through the invitation; we make a right beginning to repentance with the penitential litany's reminder of our sin; we are reminded of our mortality in the intimacy of having ashes rubbed on our foreheads; we anticipate the Easter joy of the resurrection in the Holy Eucharist. All of the Lenten themes are already here: attention and contemplation, penitence, mortality, and preparation for our great joy.

There is no need to choose between them. All are essential parts of our lives and relationships with God, and I think the liturgy stacks them up quite eloquently. So tonight I am not going to focus on one theme, but will instead comment briefly on why we need Lent this year. We need Lent so badly this year because we none of us think we have time for it. We are all engaged in great struggles—most obviously the great political struggle over what kind of nation we are to be, a struggle which some of us in this room find ourselves approaching from different angles. But regardless of our political angle, or even level of interest, I am confident that I am not alone in feeling the tyranny of the urgent these days.

We feel compelled to act NOW, to make this call, sign this petition, have this argument, rearrange our schedules to attend this event. I don't for a moment criticize this urgency, but in the midst of our compulsion to act, to plunge in, to seize every advantage in our significant and sometimes holy struggles, Lent calls us to pause. Not to cease striving, but to pause, to pray, to reflect.

Because something happens to us when we are engaged in these soul-shuddering struggles. We abhor what we know is wrong and try to fight it. In the process, though, of fighting what we know is wrong, we start to become pretty sure that we are right. This feeling naturally intensifies as we become increasingly entrenched and our opponents' arguments make less and less sense to us. And the wronger they are, the righter we are until we find ourselves to be infallible crusaders for justice and righteousness.

Lent does not ask us to believe that everyone else must be right, but only that we consider that we might be wrong. Or at least, that there is a very high probability that our rightness has an awful lot of unrighteousness tied up in it. By reminding us of our sins, of how we fall short, and calling us to self-examination, contemplation, and repentance, the season of Lent unmask the ways we deceive ourselves. This is part of what is going on in Jesus' deeply uncomfortable instructions on how to fast and pray in tonight's gospel reading. He is stripping away the tools we might use to fool ourselves and others into thinking that grace and love are commodities that we have earned, rather than free gifts that we receive, but which also call us into the duties of relationship.

It is not a strategy for winning our great struggles in the world, but for maintaining our souls through these struggles. For what does it profit us to gain the whole world but lose our souls? Our selves? What it is that makes us glad to be alive in this hurly burly being-with we have been given? There's an old maxim that a Christian should pray a certain amount of time every day, except when she is too busy. On those days, she should pray for twice the usual amount of time. This is the wisdom of this year's Lent. That time when we are most likely to set aside contemplation, self-examination, and repentance—even for very good reasons—is

precisely the time when we need it the most. For spiritual reasons, yes, but for practical reasons too because our presumed infallibility can only lead to a gentler tyranny.

And so dear friends, keep up the good fights in which you are engaged, tugging this reluctant republic into a society more worthy of the lives we could share together. But also pause, and for God's sake and all of our sakes including yours, remember that God's forgiveness and grace are freely offered, but also desperately needed. Remember that while we try to save the world, we are ourselves in parlous need of saving. In short, remember that you are dust. Amen.