

Ash Wednesday

February 17, 2010

I don't know, but I think I can guess that the state of your yards is a lot like the yard at the rectory. Azaleas are up to their shoulders, their necks, some of them in over their heads, completely buried under a mountain of snow.

During the storms, I was able to sweep snow off the boxwoods by our front porch without causing much apparent harm. But when I started digging out one of the azaleas, I heard a "snap!" as brittle branches began to break. I backed off. Later read in the Post that it's best just to leave the shrubs alone. Mother Nature will take her course, the sun will shine and the snow will melt, all with much less damage than from our well-meaning intervention. It doesn't help to try to hurry the process along.

No doubt, when everything has melted, some of the plants in our yards will have broken, pruned by the weight of the snow. But if we cut back the dead parts, we can expect to see new growth, come spring. Other plants won't have made it. Big trees were toppled around the neighborhood. Where once they gave plentiful shade, now all will be sun. Some of our neighbors will have to reconfigure their landscaping. What will grow happily fruitfully there now that would not thrive before?

The snowpocalypse affected us, too, of course, not only what grows in our yards. It knocked us out of kilter. We had to change our focus, especially if we were without power, but even if we never lost it. Routines were disrupted: no school, no work, stores closed, roads impassable. Lots of shoveling, trying to stay ahead of the snow.

It was strange. Disorienting. But also an opportunity for some revelations: how dependent we can be on the familiar rhythms of our life, and on the conveniences and comforts that usually are always available. I began to realize that, even though I mean to be intentional and aware of God in my every day life, the familiar rhythms and

comforts tend to insulate me from God's presence more than I had realized.

How much I take for granted. How little I practice gratitude. How little I grapple with the reality that most of the world's people do not enjoy even what I consider the most basic services and do not have the reserves I can fall back on. How little awareness I usually allow myself of our common humanity, our frailty, vulnerability, mortality.

Enter Lent. Or, rather, *we* enter Lent. A season when we are invited—exhorted!—by the Church to change familiar routines, to become more intentional about our spiritual practices for these forty days. To draw near to God, who already has drawn near to us.

“We entreat you on behalf of Christ,” writes the Apostle Paul, “be reconciled to God.” Be restored to harmony and friendship with God. There is the invitation of Lent. Most mysteriously, though, the lectionary omits the key news just before this that God has “reconciled us to himself through Christ.” (2 Cor. 5:18) The work of reconciliation, the reaching out to restore relationship, already has been done by God in Christ.

Why, then, do we take up or refocus on the practice of prayer—praying the Daily Office, practicing centering prayer, *lectio divina*, coming to Taizé service every Monday of Lent?

Why study, why reflect on Scripture, why take part in a Lenten class on *Creating and Living by a Rule of Life*?

Why fast—from eating meat, sweets, chocolate? From Starbucks, or tv, Facebook, computer games?

Why give alms—contributions to Episcopal Relief and Development, Haiti relief, Hope for Burundi (with the money saved by fasting from Starbucks), or service at Street Church?

Not to prove how pious we are. Not to earn God's forgiveness or favor; those are already given. "As far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our sins from us."

After the blizzard, I've begun to see the spiritual practices and disciplines of Lent as a kind of voluntary, intentional journey into disorientation, willingly allowing myself to get off balance. As I let go of attachments—to favorite foods or foods I think I have to have; attachments to distractions and entertainments, to busyness—I will sometimes feel anxious, empty, and want to calm and fill myself with some of my favorite and familiar things. But if I back away, instead, and wait and watch, aware of the attachment, the habit of filling the emptiness, there is an opening. God may not come rushing in; but there is recognition, something new.

The work of transformation belongs to God. We can't make it happen. It doesn't help to try to hurry the process along. The practices of prayer and study, fasting, service and charity help make us more available for God's reconfiguring, re-orienting, realigning us more closely with God's desire and purpose for us and for creation.

Because Lent is not all about us, our own relationship with God. It is also about US, all of us, collectively: as a community, as a people, a nation, as the whole human race, the havoc we wreak, the suffering we cause, the vulnerability and mortality we share. Lent is not only an individual journey; it is a collective one.

Listen again to the prophet Joel: "Blow the trumpet in Zion; sanctify a fast; call a solemn assembly, gather the people." All of them, the oldest and the youngest, the children, even infants at the breast; even the newly wed bride and bridegroom. Everybody must come. The work of this prayer takes all of us. The weight of our sorrow and Gods over the divisions, the violence and hatreds of the world is too great for any of us to carry alone.

The prophet believes in the power of the community's prayer to change disastrous conditions, to open the way for God's blessing. In a few minutes we will pray together the Litany of Penitence, a collective, anguished cry to God for mercy.

We are praying here for the world, for its repentance, forgiveness, reconciliation, restoration to harmony and friendship with God and neighbor. We offer ourselves to God as God's allies, willing open channels for God's healing in a broken world.. This is the natural outcome of opening ourselves more fully to God's presence and influence in our lives. Of being reconciled ourselves, reoriented through the strange practice of disorientation.

This is the journey that Lent invites us into. If we accept the invitation and set out on this way, who can guess what may grow fruitfully and happily come spring, that did not thrive before?