

Sermon preached by The Rev. Charles Rowins at St. Christopher-by-the-Sea, Gibson Island, Maryland, 4th Sunday of Lent, March 31, 2019.

Here we are, in the fourth week of Lent. Well beyond the midway point. And this year perhaps we have tried really hard to do justice to this special Season. Maybe we have instituted upgrades in our prayer life and in our fasting and in our study of scripture and in our outreach to those less fortunate. And maybe we are proud of our effort. It's something we have wanted to do, and even began to do in previous years, but with little follow-through.

But this year seems different. We seem to be doing much better at maintaining our discipline. So much so that we actually are feeling a bit sorry for those unable to keep up with us. Their record, compared to our growth, appears mediocre at best. Maybe so mediocre that they won't even qualify for Easter.

Something is wrong here, isn't there, both with the assessment of our achievement and the assessment of the achievement of others. Sounds like, feels like, pride before the fall. Well, fortunately, our lessons this morning bring us to our senses.

We start with the lesson from Joshua (**Joshua 5:9-12**). God rescued the Israelites from Egypt, and then God provided manna while the Israelites wandered in the wilderness on their way home. And now God has intervened yet again on their behalf and enabled the land to support the growing of crops. A sign of economic self-sufficiency, not slavery.

It's a wonderful Story, but the Israelites can't claim that it is their Story alone, any more than you and I can claim that our more disciplined effort this Lent is ours to brag about. Yes, to thank God, absolutely. But not to claim the improvement as a function exclusively of our behavior.

God's role is decisive. Look at the signs of our Lenten growth: more consistent prayer, more careful study, more generous outreach. We have company in these efforts. Someone else sets expectations. Someone else provides second chances when we get bogged down. Yes, a healthy Lent is a joint effort, and we best not forget it.

Psalm 32 highlights the benefits of confession. There is little spiritual growth without an acknowledgment of sin. Verse 6: "I said, 'I will confess my

transgressions to the Lord. Then you forgave me the guilt of my sin.” Without a, we don’t get b. And without b, we don’t get c. Here again, the Lord is central to whatever growth we experience. Verse 11: “Mercy embraces those who trust in the Lord.”

In the passage from Second Corinthians (**II Corinthians 5:16-21**), St. Paul reminds us that we have been appointed “ambassadors for Christ.” What an honor. But is this honor based on our performance? No, the honor is based on God’s performance. “In Christ, God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting our trespasses against us.” “All this is from God,” Paul tells the Corinthians.

We have a ministry to the world thanks to God. We didn’t invent this ministry. We inherited it. Again, God was and is central to this ministry. If we’re experiencing a really meaningful Lent, it’s because God has been and will be our partner in this endeavor.

Now, just in case we haven’t gotten the message, St. Luke (**Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32**) shares a parable about a father and two sons. If we are really pleased with our Lenten growth, we need to pay close attention to the second son in the parable.

He’s the son who does everything right. And he’s the Son who is really angry when the father celebrates the return of the first son who has done everything wrong. “Get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate, for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!”

The second son, the one with the good record, is angry at the Father, and refuses to join in the celebration. At which point, the father gives the so-called good son a reminder: “But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.”

This collection of lessons is designed to remind us that when we achieve a respectable, maybe even an exemplary record of obedience, we need to recognize that God has been part of this effort. We might not have recognized it at the time, but, upon reflection, we had best give credit where credit is due.

A huge part, maybe the central part, of maintaining a strong Lenten discipline is the joy of doing this in the company of the Lord. It’s as if the Lord asks us if He can join us on our Lenten journey. Imagine that. Jesus asking us if he can join us.

He doesn't force his way into our lives. He could do that, you know. God has that power and that option. And sometimes He will do so. But most of the time God encourages us to try our best and to let Him help us when we need that help, which is most of the time.

"I want to be your coach and your teammate. Will you please let me?" Sounds like Mr. Rogers, doesn't it? "I know a thing or two. I can help you. I can tell you when you're headed the wrong way. But only if you want me to. Only if you say yes to my offer."

This morning's Collect uses an interesting phrase. "Evermore give us this bread, that he – Jesus - may live in us, and we in him." That's what the Season of Lent is all about. Inviting God into our lives so that we are better prepared to experience growth, including a more disciplined Lent.

And it's not just about a single Season of the Church Year. It's about our whole life. Here's the final verse of hymn 436:

So come, my Sovereign; enter in!
Let new and nobler life begin;
Thy Holy Spirit guide us on,
Until the glorious crown be won.

There are two weeks left in Lent: this week and then one more. It's not too late to join the Lord who is leading this journey in preparation for Holy Week. We just have to make sure that we don't claim any Lenten discipline achievements as our own. If they exist – and we hope they do – they are joint endeavors.

And the more that we recognize God's role in these efforts, the more lasting and more satisfying they will be. There's a reason why one of the great Easter hymns begins with the sentiment "Welcome, happy morning."

Which is a good reminder that when the Lord asks us if he can join us in our Lenten journey, our grateful response should be "Welcome aboard."

Amen.