

Ash Wednesday, Feb. 6, 2008.

Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Manasquan, NJ.

Joel 2:1-2,12-17; II Corinthians 5:20b-6:10; Psalm 51:1-18; Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21.

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ, today we begin the 40-day season of Lent, a time of repentance and renewal, a journey with Jesus to Jerusalem, the cross, and the tomb. May this be a time of remembrance, a time of truth, a time to meet Jesus along the way.

Sometimes when we want to get close to one of our children or to an old friend, we sit down and open up the baby books or photo albums together and remember how they used to look, their first words, the day of their Baptism, First Holy Communion and other milestones. Old married people look at pictures of their wedding, of their first date or when they were dressed up for a dance. They may even speak again the words they spoke when they promised their love to one another. We value old pictures of our parents when they were young. We try to remember how they looked when we were kids and they were in the prime of their lives.

In our desire to be closer to our Lord this Lenten season, we also turn to remembering. This evening we pause to remember who we are, who God is, whose we are, and why we do things.

The stark words you hear when you are marked with ashes: “Remember you are dust and to dust you shall return,” are a strong reminder of WHO we are. Much as we try to deny and postpone it, we will all face our own death some day, and we have faced already the death of others. So, early this night we

pause to remember our humanity and, in contrast, the divinity, the everlasting nature of the God who made us.

This is ultimate reality, nothing like our TV reality shows. We ARE dust, but, remember also, that we are dust made lovingly by a loving God. Here we gather: dust-people, linked with all the other dust-people in the world, of all times and places. The all-powerful God links us as companions in our journeys and promises us an eternal love that will see us through the journey and beyond.

Because we are linked as brothers and sisters, children of this One God, our importance and self-esteem arise much more from the fact of WHOSE we are than from the facts of WHO we are.

During Lent we are invited to personal reflection on who we are, whose we are, and how we choose to live. Sometimes, sadly, we live differently from how God intended us to live.

New Jersey is blessed with many traffic circles, some right here, some we drive through on a daily basis. Many parts of the country have no such traffic patterns, however. I once heard the story of a person who moved here and had never driven in one before. I can't even imagine how one could do this, but this woman drove into one of our traffic circles THE WRONG WAY. Suddenly she found herself facing a huge, oncoming truck. Brakes screeched. The truck driver put on his caution lights, got out of his rig, and motioned for the other oncoming traffic to stop. He came up to the shaken woman's car window and said, "Turn around, you're o.k., you obviously

haven't lived here long. I doubt if you'll ever do this again." She turned around and I'm sure she hasn't done that again!

Pastor Beth tells of her most embarrassing driving blunder when she was learning to drive a Volkswagen with a standard shift. She had been taught to shift into 2nd gear immediately after first. But no one told her not to do that when traveling up the ramp in a parking garage. So, on her first solo attempt to drive up a parking garage ramp, she stalled in 2nd gear about 8 times. Frustrated, she noticed a long line of impatient drivers behind her. Finally a man got out of his car, came and asked her to get out of hers. He drove her car up the ramp, ran back, told her to run ahead and yelled, "keep it in first next time." She ran up, got in, kept driving, and has never made that mistake again.

We can all see ourselves as the drivers in these stories, meant to mirror our lives. We have made our share of just plain errors in judgment, mistakes, and poor choices. Those drivers were just not knowledgeable and made mistakes anyone could make.

Part of Lenten reflection is also to admit to ourselves the times we have made these mistakes and poor choices *on purpose*. That's what the church calls sin. And none of us escapes. It's part of our dust-nature. It's part of WHO we are.

Now it is suddenly critical to know WHOSE we are. God acts like the truck driver in the traffic circle. God helps us turn our car around and sends us

around the circle the right way, even helps us remember next time which way to drive.

And God is also like the driver in the parking garage. Sometimes we make the same mistake over and over. And, if we are lucky, God will take the wheel for a moment, showing us how to move forward, and mercifully call out instructions for the next time. And, when the next time comes around, God – as Holy Spirit – is also there as memory, as remembrance, embedded in our brain and heart, to remind us how to drive forward the right way.

I tell these simple traffic stories to help us in our remembering.

Remembering our sins, but also how we have been forgiven, and how we are set straight for the road ahead. Living life is not as easy as learning to drive. But in life we have more to trust than the merciful whim of other drivers. We move forward under the constant and faithful mercy of the great Driver of the Universe – the One Who made it, made us, and sustains it and us.

When Jesus taught his disciples about fasting, prayer, doing acts of love, and giving offerings, helpful tools in our journey – through Lent and through life – he spoke about hypocrisy. He reflected on the WHY behind our deeds. In today's Gospel, he was not telling the disciples they MUST pray or MUST fast or MUST give offerings; he was assuming that they DID those things and asked them to examine their motivation. Do we do these things to impress others or to avoid shame? Do we do them to show devotion to God? Is it even possible for us to have unselfish motives?

Jesus also talks about storing our faith in earthly treasures: in wealth, clothes, cars, houses, jobs or health. All of these can be taken away or destroyed. The danger in trusting in them is not only that they have no abiding power to save us, but that they can interfere with our trust in GOD: the source of our true wealth and security.

Jesus talks about fasting. When we fast, we experience a new gratitude when we do eat again. Eating a simple soup supper, as we do on Wednesdays in Lent, is a way for us to experience hunger in a very small way, so that we will once again see food as a gift. It is a way for us to learn about and struggle against the inequalities of life that allow some people to go hungry while others have plenty of food. Most of the world would be grateful for the meal we have just shared. So may God bless you as you remember the poor, and may God bless your offerings to fight world hunger.

Often we think of Lent as a serious and depressing time. But the original meaning of Lent was “Lenz” or springtime, so we do well to think of it as a time for preparation, planting and growth. We are called to dig deep into ourselves, allow ourselves “15 minutes of truth” now and then, and seek renewed trust in God. By God’s grace, we will see where we have been driving the wrong way around the circle or shifting into the wrong gear at the wrong time. By God’s grace, we will be spared some of the most dire consequences of our sins and shown how to move forward. By God’s grace we are reminded WHO we are, WHOSE we are, and WHY we do things. Sometimes changes in our perspective and motives and actions happen very slowly. We need all the help we can get. So we turn to the words and pictures that God uses to draw us to Godself.

The “baby books” and photo albums of our faith lives are the scriptures and reading and prayers of Lent; they help us remember. This year we will carefully and thoroughly address six major stories of Jesus’ journey on earth: the story of his forty-day fast and temptation, the stories of meaningful encounters with a seeker called Nicodemus, the Samaritan woman at the well, the man born blind, Lazarus and his grieving sisters Mary and Martha, and finally the powerful story of Jesus reaching Jerusalem in celebration and moving rapidly to the cross.

And at each worship gathering – as well as this evening – we are called to remember Jesus. To hear again the familiar words that tell Jesus’ promises to his disciples in the night in which he was betrayed and to accept a small piece of bread and a tiny sip of wine – in remembrance of our Lord, whose suffering and death, and, yes!, also his resurrection, prefigure our own life, death and new life. Through Christ, even while we are still alive on this earth, we are blessed with abundant new life –

driving out of the circle with more insight than we went in,
hearing and believing the words of compassion addressed to us,
changing how we drive, how we live,
finding true joy in love and service to others, and
sharing bread with others here and around the world.

May God grant all these things for Jesus’ sake. Amen.