

Newsletter Reflections for March

March seems to always bring thoughts of spring, even if it is the month that we are most often likely to see snowfall. This year the church calendar will mark two significant events early in the month. The first Sunday of the month is recognized as the Transfiguration of the Lord Sunday, even if we often don't know exactly what transfiguration meant. Each of the gospel accounts tells us that Jesus takes his closest friends among the disciples with him for a walk up on a mountain top for a unique experience. While there, his appearance seems different and they see him speaking with the patriarchs of their tradition—Moses and Elijah. The event appears in the three synoptic gospel narratives with some different details, but in all Peter wants build shelters for the three and stay on the mountain top with them; after Moses and Elijah vanish, a voice from heaven declares Jesus is the beloved Son and commands the disciples to “Listen to him”, and then Jesus tells them to tell no one what they have seen and heard until later and they descend back down the mountain. Despite the various length of the gospel narratives, this event appears at the midpoint of each one. Despite the variations in the timing of that most important event on our church calendar, Easter, the observance of Transfiguration Sunday marks the transition from Epiphany to our preparation for Easter. Epiphany Sunday began with God's announcement far beyond the region of Jesus' birth of his act of love to redeem the world. We have had seven Sundays since that announcement and have considered some of the actions of Jesus' life and ministry; the calling of disciples and some teachings. In some ways this proximity of Transfiguration Sunday to Ash Wednesday which begins the penitential period of forty days before the Palm Sunday Entrance followed by Black Friday before we arrive at the Easter celebration of the Resurrection seem to have some common threads. The Transfiguration experience, I think forms the basis for what has been called “mountain-top” experiences. Times when you have experiences of a sense of beauty, or peace, or comfort for which you don't have a logical explanation but during which you have felt a spiritual presence. These experiences often make us like Peter. We want to hold on to them or re-create them. That is almost impossible to do. But they can be treasured. They can be used as sources of strength and comfort. But then, like the disciple, we must go back down the mountain. Unlike Jesus, they did not know or understand, or want to know or understand what was going to happen. The reality of the journey Jesus was on would soon overtake them all. And it is the reality of that experience that we begin to contemplate so close to the narrative of the Transfiguration. On Ash Wednesday, it is customary to take a prayer journey toward the meaning of what Jesus Christ came to dwell among us to accomplish for us. The purpose of this is to consider the meaning of discipleship in your life. Traditions have developed around this period—some of which are frivolous, some of which have deep meaning for those who participate. Fasting can be an example of both depending on how it is done. I participate in a blog called “What they didn't teach me in Seminary” which various folks post questions about issues they encounter in their ministries. One question which was asked which came to my attention a few weeks ago, was a question about drive by ashes on Ash Wednesday. The meaning of the deposition of ashes on the forehead is only truly worthwhile and significant internally. The amount of time spent to obtain them is irrelevant. If the ashes are more meaningful when they are applied at the conclusion of a worship service with a community of faith, then that is the way that they should be received. If the ashes are being applied as a symbol of penitence, of repentance, of contemplation about discipleship, of a spiritual endeavor, then the means or timing of the application is not the issue of importance. If the

ashes are being applied as a type of “show and tell”, then I am not sure that there is a meaning to them. However, I would add this final note. The meaning of the ashes is not found in the one who applies them, or in how they are applied, but in the one who receives them. And you can never know in advance how the Spirit may use what is applied however casually, however quickly to create unexpected meaning in someone who felt they did not have enough time for a more lengthy experience. And, quite frankly, meditation on the phrases from scripture most commonly used for Ash Wednesday services and imposition if done sincerely can set the tone to begin the Lenten Season. (Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return.)

Shalom,

Pastor Libby

As we thought about some others during February, we participated in the “Souper Bowl of Caring” offering and we gathered Valentines to send to our Veterans as a way to offer our appreciation for their services rendered to our country.